*cine*ACTION

RADICAL FILM CRITICISM AND THEORY

Murder in America

Texas Chainsaw Massacre

contents
no. 38

Murder in America

When I first conceived of 'Murder in America' as a possible theme for a forthcoming *CineAction*, it was late last August, and the mainstream print and electronic media had veered uncomfortably close to tabloid journalism with their sensationalised reports of sensational murder trials: the Menendez brothers; the Bobbitts; O.J. Simpson. Not only were there constant news updates on the events of each trial, but the trials themselves were (and in the case of O.J., still are) available on a daily basis, courtesy of CNN and Court TV. Even here in pacific Toronto, the Homolka trial's blanket of secrecy had elicited an enthusiasm for free access to grisly details and gory evidence once deemed as uncharacteristic of Canadians as was the charge of 'serial killing' itself. The Bernardo trial has since proven to us that we too have our nightmares.

One of the most striking results of the televising of these trials has been the inevitable conflation/confusion of real life fact with telefiction: Judge Ito's 'people's court' with Judge Wapner's. 'Murder as entertainment' reflects this in its intersection of life and art, life *as* art. From the 1963 Zapruder footage showing in graphic detail the impact of a rifle bullet on President Kennedy's head to the 1980's Mondo film which includes that shot as one of many real life horrors in compilation format, to both its presentation (fact) and recreation (fiction) in Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991), the president's 'exploding head' has been coded cinematically as a frozen moment beyond comprehension. The president canonized; the murderer Lee Harvey Oswald, forever demonized.

Photograph by Christina Yuan

Quentin Tarantino's 1994 trope on this in *Pulp Fiction* reduces the horror to humour, transforming the 'head shot' into a joke; what do you do with the pieces of brain and gobs of blood messing up the car? Jackie's traumatized reaching back over the trunk of the car for a brain fragment replaced by Keitel's 'cleaner'. The killers, Vince and Jules, heroized; the victim, unimportant; the gasp become the guffaw.

Among the details that Paul Bernardo's lawyer kept from the public during Karla Homolka's trial was the existence of videotapes made by her husband, which documented each of the prolonged assaults, rapes, and quite possibly murders of two teenage girls. The question of purpose behind these tapes calls to mind the unforgettable scene in John McNaughton's *Henry:Portrait of a Serial Killer* (1990) where what appears to be a videotaping of a horrifically violent home invasion turns out to be a VCR screening of the tape by the videographer/killers as they sit in their living room, drinking beer and replaying the 'good parts'. Were Bernardo's tapes for personal use? Or were they for commercial use? This is precisely where the blurring of content and context occurs: home videos depicting sex and/or violence, x-rated pornography, mondo films, and even low budget slasher films never intended for theatrical screening. Rather, their audience is precisely the viewer 'at home', seated on a sofa in the privacy of their living room, endlessly able to re-view the moment of the exposed body, whether in violent sex or in violent death.

If murder has become entertainment, then in our media-addled world, the murderer has become a celebrity. Our epoch has witnessed the shift in popularity from 'celebrity murders'—JFK, RFK, Martin Luther King, John Lennon, and attempted murders, George Wallace, Ronald Reagan—to 'celebrity *murderers*'—Charles Manson, Jeffrey Dahmer, Ted Bundy, John Wayne Gacy, Henry Lee Lucas. (Curiously, Dahmer is the only one of the above who has not been the subject of a film, TV or otherwise. Perhaps serial cannibalism isn't as 'fascinating' or maybe just not as photogenic as rape and murder.) It is entirely to Oliver Stone's credit that his recent film *Natural Born Killers* (1994) problematizes precisely this issue of celebrity status for serial murderers.

The Call for Papers that I sent out in the fall resulted in a great amount of interest. As editor, I had the good fortune to have far more papers submitted than I had room for. This enabled me to give a tight focus to this issue, tighter than any of the other issues that I've edited. Certain topics seemed to

recur more frequently than others. I must admit that I was surprised by the frequency with which the Zapruder film cropped up. It appears as a key element in the first three papers, and is mentioned in several others as well. Haidee Wasson's piece opens the issue with a historical investigation of the cultural significance of the Zapruder footage, and then Tom Mullin places it within a filmic context. Ken Morrison takes a broader look at the history of the murdered body and its investigation, using the shower scene in *Psycho* and the use of the Zapruder film in *JFK* as examples. Next, Mikita Brottman analyses the Mondo film in the light of its relation to horror and porno genres, using Bakhtin's notion of the 'carnivalesque' as a way into an understanding of its place in our culture. Serial murderers also evoked attention; again, as a key topic in two papers, but appearing in a number of others, besides. Annalee Newitz looks at the phenomenon from a Marxian perspective, taking the killer as producer, the victim as object of production. Philip Simpson's piece on a specific instance of serial killing, that of Danny Rollins, the 'Gainesville Ripper', deals with the self-construction of the killer as 'celebrity', and both his *and* the media's appropriation of the horror movie genre to describe and explain his actions. 'Home invasion' takes on a new meaning in Edward O'Neill's investigation into television's cop reality shows. And Julianne Pidduck's paper rounds off the issue with an analysis of the killer female she calls the 'fatal femme' evident in so many recent Hollywood films.

One of the unexpected pleasures in editing this issue has been the realization that there is a lot of cross-referencing and intertextuality among the articles, approximating a book rather than a collection of papers. My one regret is there is no discussion of *Natural Born Killers* or Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* or *Pulp Fiction*. I suppose that will have to come at a later date.

This issue would not have come into existence without the Internet. I am indebted to it for opening up the possibility of an international community of potential authors and for facilitating communication through practically instantaneous email. I owe a thanks to a former student of mine, Aaron Weintraub, for taking the time to initiate me into its arcane practices.

Susan
Morrison
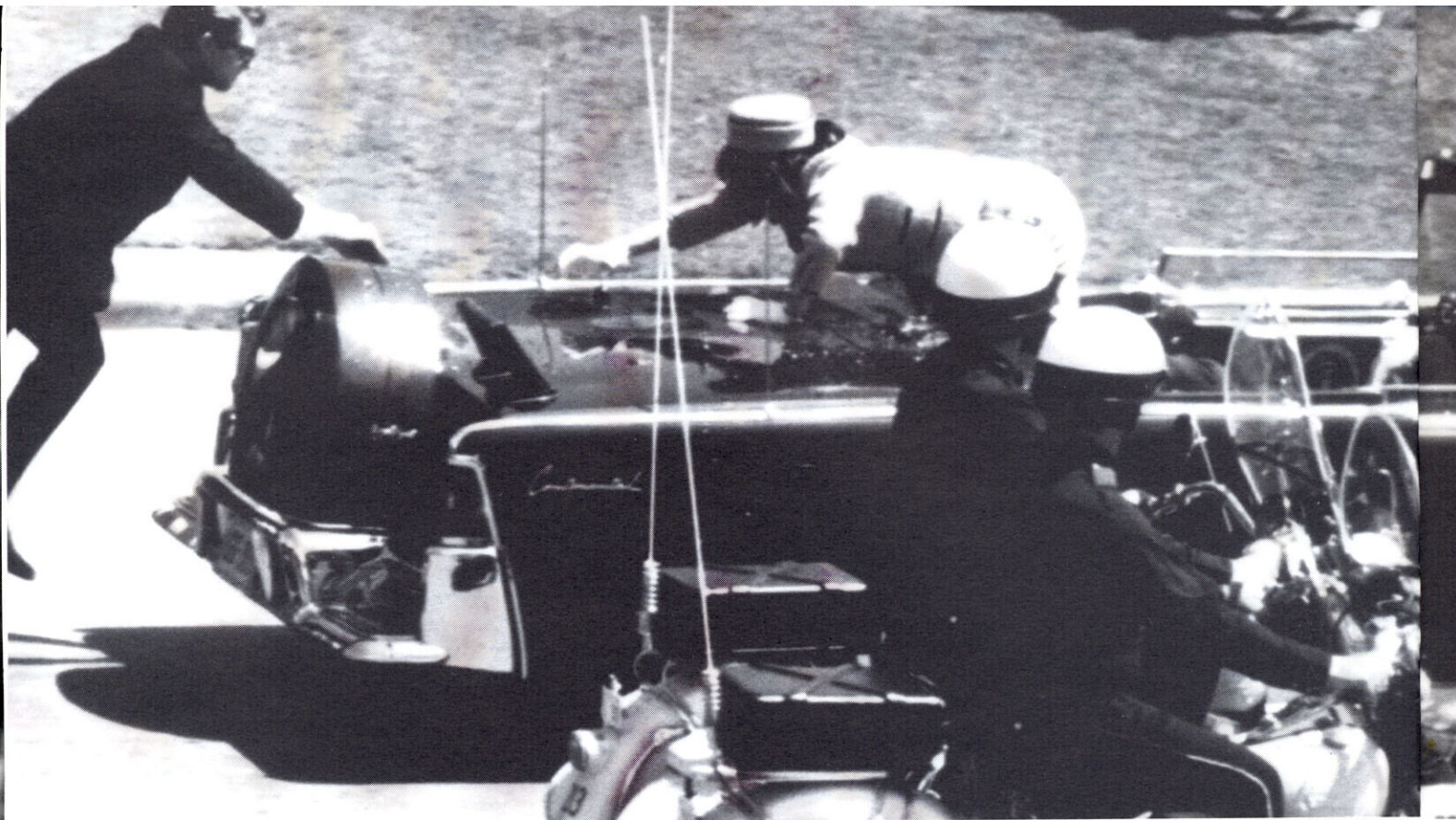
Assassinating an Image: The Strange Life of Kennedy's Death

The true picture of the past flits by.
The past can be seized only as an image
which flashes up at the instant when
it can be recognized and
is never seen again.
Walter Benjamin[1]

At first I thought that he
(Zapruder)
shot the President.
Bill Newman, a bystander in
Dealey Plaza, November 22, 1963[2]

The life of John F. Kennedy begins and ends—and begins again—with the image. As the son of a cinephile, J.F.K. was familiar with the peculiar power and place of images in constructing contemporary myths. His father, Joseph P. Kennedy, believed that it was within the cinematic and photographic world that the next generation's aristocracy would be born and, as such, eagerly surrounded his family with still and moving picture cameras.[3] This, in part, explains the enormous quantity of the Kennedy family's home movies and photographs, but how can we begin to understand the remarkable resilience and continuous omnipresence of these images? More specifically, why is it that representations of Kennedy's death are so readily situated beside those of his life—both resonating with a familiarity and nostalgia saturated with the uncanny?
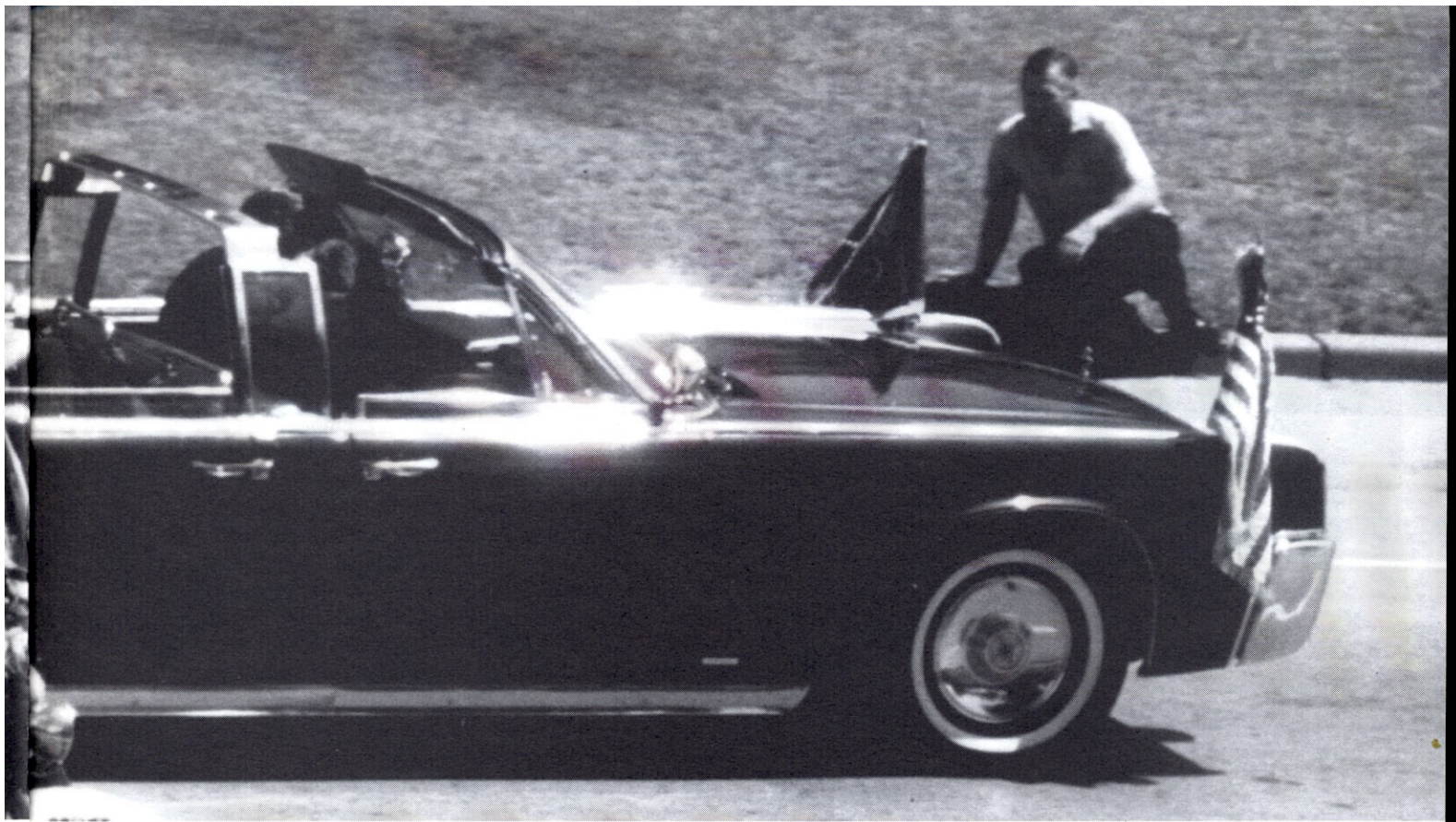
A re-enactment from Oliver Stone's *JFK*

by Haidee Wasson

The energetic circulation of the Kennedy images in journalistic, fictive and fantastical media contexts grants them a peculiar place in popular iconography. Relentlessly re-used and resituated, their familiarity grants them an element of transparency wherein their status as filmic or photographic representations is foregone and their status as popular historical objects is accepted. Their reproducibility grants them a remarkable and material malleability, allowing these images to be simultaneously with and without reference, history, and politics. The diverse and dynamic economy of these images—photographic, celluloid, magnetic, electronic and digital—supports this claim. They have become as comfortable as an old family photo or a travel-worn map, and as marketable as Malcolm's X and the Berlin Wall. While we are painfully aware of their status as images, their resonance situates them somewhere between this status and their significance in cultural iconography—an iconography largely fed by the multiplying referents used to negotiate their meaning: legal, historical, nostalgic, satirical, popular and sensational. Indeed, the currency of Jackie's blood-stained dress, Kennedy's raised right hand, and the infamous grassy knoll demonstrates the highly charged, historically contested, and thematically compelling character of these images and motions towards the ambiguous

cultural imperative to integrate them into our everyday and extraordinary understanding.

The following pages represent an attempt to unravel the history of particular Kennedy-images in order to access and perhaps enhance their uncanny and persistent mystique. More specifically, the use and re-use of the most complete visual recording of Kennedy's assassination, the Zapruder Footage, is outlined and discussed. In highlighting the remarkable elasticity of these images, their ever-expanding capacity to be recreated, mimicked and mocked, this paper considers the cultural and conceptual significance of Zapruder's footage. The familiarity of Dealey Plaza and its many mysteries have come to us largely because of Zapruder's footage and its mass dissemination. Often quoting the angles and movement within Zapruder's film, the horror of the murder has been seemlessly and endlessly recast as sit-com joke and Hollywood courtroom drama. What does this suggest about the role of imag-

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[1] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p.255.
[2] quoted in Jim Marrs, *Crossfire: The Plot That Killed Kennedy*. (New York: Carroll & GRAF Publishers Inc., 1989) p.70.
[3] The most extensive collection of these photographs and films are currently archived in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library, Columbia Point, Boston Massachusetts.

Jackie, after the assassination, refused to change her dress. Her husband's bloodstains testifying to the horror of the event. From *Life in Camelot: The Kennedy Years.* Photo by Jim Murray, Wide World.

ing technologies for mediating tragedies such as the Kennedy assassination as the various contexts of these images inevitably change the events themselves? Why is it that we can justifiably laugh at murder, wear it on a t-shirt and continue to investigate it thirty years later? Does the assassination itself become more *or* less meaningful? Or, rather, might the murder become more *and* less meaningful, as it greets shifting socio-historical contexts? If so, what are the implications for celluloid renderings of political events, now inescapably attached to an ever-intensifying media feed?

ZAPRUDER MEETS KENNEDY

There is perhaps no representation of cultural space and spectacle that has received more attention than a twenty-two second, grainy, silent, independent film whose name we only know as 'The Zapruder Footage.' Zapruder's footage is the most clear, graphic and compelling visual recording of Kennedy's death. As such, it is also the most commonly viewed, studied and recreated footage of Kennedy's life or presidency. Since the Zapruder footage became widely available in 1975, many assassination researchers have made the

film the cornerstone of their research. Moreover, Zapruder's footage can be found not only in countless scientific studies but also in innumerable documentaries, fictions, fantasies, trading cards, situation comedies, confessionals, 'real TV' shows, internet debates, and artistic reincarnations. The Zapruder footage has crept its way into the darkest of political corners, the brightest of spotlights and the most central of cultural debates. It is scientific object and mythic material, political cornerstone and radical metaphor, bumper sticker and home to archetypal imagery of fallen kings. The elasticity of the film requires an understanding of these celluloid images as both resilient and malleable, seductive and grotesque. Underlying these apparent contradictions, perhaps enabling them, is a simultaneous reverence towards, and ritualization of, Kennedy's death—a relentlessly multi-mediated tragedy whose implications continue to unfold.

Abraham Zapruder was a modest dressmaker whose offices overlooked Dealey Plaza. It had rained the morning of November 22, 1963. The grey skies had discouraged many who had planned to attend the presidential motorcade. The weather, in combination with his heavy workload, had convinced Zapruder to stay in his office and forego the opportunity to see Kennedy and his begrudgingly ambassadorial wife. Zapruder's orders were piling up on his desk and he had forgotten his new Bell and Howell 8mm movie camera at home. Nevertheless, at the urging of his secretaries, Zapruder endured the seven-mile trip home in order to retrieve his camera. When he finally returned to the sight, crowds had already gathered. He quickly began the task of selecting the best angle from which to record the motorcade. In front of the now infamous 'Grassy Knoll,' Zapruder spotted a four-foot concrete block which marked the beginning of the steps leading to the knoll.[4] This position offered him the unobstructed view he wanted. As he was testing the camera on some nearby office workers, Zapruder lost his balance. In order not to jeopardize the success of his project, Zapruder asked one of his secretaries to stand beside him and provide support for his quivering arm.[5]

As the motorcade passed, Zapruder was struck with confusion. His testimony to the Warren Commission[6] records:

[4] The 'Grassy Knoll' is the most oft-suggested site of a possible second shooter in Kennedy's assassination and has therefore been the site of enormous controversy. Evidence of a second shooter requires a conspiracy theory and contradicts the results of official investigations conducted by the Johnson administration that Kennedy was killed by the lone assassin—Lee Harvey Oswald. See Marrs, pp. 62-67.
[5] See Marrs, pp. 62-67.
[6] The Warren Commission is the President's Committee that was struck immediately after Kennedy's assassination by President Lyndon B. Johnson. Its heavy dependence on the Zapruder footage to establish crucial aspects of their case for the 'lone nut' scenario can be found in The New York Times ed. *Report of the Warren Commission: The Assassination of John F. Kennedy - The New York Times Edition.* (New York: McGraw Hill Company, 1964): pp.62,75,100-102, 105-107 and 109-110.

It seemed that they had heard a shot but they didn't know exactly what had happened as the car sped away, and I kept on just yelling, "They killed him, they killed him, they killed him," and finally got to my office and my secretary   I told her to call the police or the Secret Service   I don't know what she was doing, and that's about all. I was very upset. Naturally, I couldn't imagine such a thing being done. I just went to my desk and stopped there until police came and then we were required to get a place to develop the films. I knew I had something, I figured it might be of some help—I didn't know what.[7]

Ironically, popular history does not record Zapruder's testimony or his uncertainty, only the frames of his film. His images have declared themselves to be more compelling than his words. Nevertheless, Zapruder's assassination-day confusion soon turned into a lucrative deal with *LIFE* Magazine.

Richard Stolley was the *LIFE* reporter who had been sent to cover the Dallas presidential tour. Stolley ferreted out Zapruder at his home the night of the assassination and arranged a meeting with him the following morning. A special press screening was arranged the next day with journalists from the Associated Press, *The Saturday Evening Post* and CBS in attendance. Before any other journalist could produce an offer, Stolley had secured Zapruder's film for a total of 150,000 dollars.[8] The other journalists in attendance decided against bidding on the footage, ruling the content to be excessively graphic and overly dramatic for their televisual purposes. Dan Rather was the only exception to this case.[9] Upon notification of *LIFE's* deal with Zapruder, Rather—representing CBS—rallied to rent the film for a single broadcast, but *LIFE* refused.[10]

The Zapruder footage would not be seen again publicly for some time. While *LIFE* published stills extracted from the Zapruder footage in subsequent magazine issues,[11] the film *qua* film would not enjoy a national audience until 1975. Preceding this debut, the film garnered considerable prestige as evidence in the Warren Commission Report. The footage was used as a virtual 'time-clock' to establish the position, number and timing of the alleged assassin's shots. Earl Warren, head of the Commission and then-Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, dubbed the Zapruder footage 'the only unimpeachable witness' in the entire case.[12] With this, the film began to acquire the marks of state authority and juridical truth as its frames were scientifically entered in order to dissect the minutiae of assassination-site movement—from an assassin's bullets to Kennedy's facial gestures. Nevertheless, the Warren Commission's use of the footage has, in itself, been the subject of much controversy. This controversy ranges from disputes regarding alleged tampering with the film, to discussions regarding the nature of filmic evidence, to debates addressing the most effective way to access that information.[13] Also of concern has been the outright omission of particular Zapruder frames. In the published report of the Committee's findings, four of the film's key frames are simply missing. Conspiracy theorists and Warren Commission supporters alike have scrambled to explain and to speculate as to both the cause of this 'oversight' and the possible content of the mysterious frames.

In the process of these scientific explorations, each frame of the Zapruder footage has been labelled according to its position in relation to the whole of the

[7] The New York Times, ed. *The Witnesses.* (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1964), p. 47. In fact, Zapruder's testimony also indicates that he was convinced he heard shots coming from behind him, on the Grassy Knoll. Interestingly, Zapruder's footage was used for many years to support the Warren Commission's official explanation of Kennedy's death as the result of a lone assassin, who fired from behind the motorcade, on the sixth floor of the nearby Texas School Book Depository. Zapruder's frames are most well-known for their shocking portrayal of Kennedy's fatal head wound—the result of a shot which propels his head sharply back and to the left, an angle many argue requires a shot from in front of the limousine rather than behind. A shot from in front of the limousine necessitates another shooter and therefore, by definition, a conspiracy. Inaccurate or incomplete descriptions of the images-in-sequence, often accompanied published film stills which were copyrighted and thereby controlled by *LIFE* until 1968. These descriptions and stills were generally referred to as a key authority for establishing the singular possibility of a lone assassin and indeed, in punctuating the horror of the event. Their 'authority' was also clearly used to discount considerable eye-witness testimony contradicting early official interpretations of the film—even the testimony of Zapruder himself. For years, conspiracy theorists have argued that there was a second or maybe even a third shooter who was positioned on the grassy knoll that sat behind Zapruder's perch.

[8] See Richard Stolley, "The Zapruder Film: Shots Seen Round the World," in Oliver Stone and Zachary Sklar, *JFK: The Book of the Film.* (New York: Applause, 1993), pp. 410-412; Robert Hennelly and Jerry Pelicoff, "JFK: How The Media Assassinated the Real Story," *The Village Voice.* (31 March 1992).

[9] Dan Rather's career experienced a considerable boost partly because of his claim to having witnessed the assassination and partly because of his self-proclaimed determination to investigate it. For an example of Rather's self-involved ruminations on Kennedy's assassination see Dan Rather *CBS Evening News.*"JFK: Then and Now" (CBS News: New York, 1983); *48 Hours.* "JFK" (CBS-TV, New York, 5 Feb. 1992). Rather also devotes considerable time to the assassination in his book *The Camera Never Blinks: Adventures of a TV Journalist* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1977) pp. 111-149. For further discussions of Rather's role and the role of journalists in the Kennedy conundrum generally see: Barbie Zelizer, *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory.* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

[10] See Mary Ann Watson *The Expanding Vista: American Television in the Kennedy Years.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) p. 216.

[11] *LIFE's* three weekly issues and the Memorial edition which each contained the Zapruder frames, all published before 1969, had a total distribution of over 23,750,000. Interestingly, in each of these issues the drama of the head shot is downplayed. In the first issue to be published after Kennedy's death, the head-shot is entirely absent—descriptively or pictorially. This points to the perceived volatility of this particular image historically both as evidence and as national trauma.

[12] For this and other commentary including a federal ruling on the legitimacy of copyrighting and controlling the publication of Zapruder's stills see: *Time Incorporated V. Bernard Geis Associates,* 293 F. Supp.130 (1968) p. 136.

film. Z208, Z209, Z210, Z211 are the titles used to designate the frames missing from the Warren Report. There are slightly over 400 frames in the Zapruder film. Running at 18.3 frames per second, the film contains approximately 10 seconds of key footage. Within the Warren Commission's Report, as in most assassination research projects, each frame is carefully reproduced as a still, and analyzed for possible clues. This implies that each frame—sometimes separated and sometimes viewed in relation to its surrounding frames—has been analyzed for the .0546 seconds of meaning it is considered to contain. Debates rage in the assassination research community as to what each frame reveals about the actual event that day—whether Kennedy responded to the sound of gunfire at Z210 or Z211, or whether or not the girl in the red dress had stopped running at Z190 or at Z191. Under consideration are crucial pieces of evidence regarding the actual timing of bullets sometimes determined by the reactions of bystanders to traces of these bullets as light or sound,[14] the speed at which the Presidential motorcade travelled and by Kennedy's own physical reactions. Other tests, based on re-enacted scenarios constructed to prove or disprove the plausibility of a lone gunman are based on information assumed to be self-evident in the footage itself. For instance, re-enactments of Lee Harvey Oswald's alleged activities in the Book Depository are largely based on the establishment of the three-shot scenario derived from Kennedy's reactions to gunfire as represented in Zapruder's frames. For years, marksmen have attempted to prove or disprove the plausibility of firing three rifle shots in six seconds— this six seconds established by interpretations of Zapruder's meagre frames. Within the research community, the Zapruder footage has been voraciously upheld as a viable source of evidence. Its frames are consistently assumed to be windows onto the chaos of the day. However, what that window reveals, and on what basis, is the subject of passionate and proliferating debate

In the late sixties, under a subpoena served to Time Inc.,[15] New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison obtained a copy of the film to be used as evidence of conspiracy in the trial of Clay Shaw—the very same trial dramatized in Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991). During this temporary release, bootleg copies were made to feed a burgeoning conspiracy community. Despite possessing the means to distribute the film, Time Inc. consistently refused requests from researchers and other interested parties for private screenings, public screenings or publication of stills. Time's reluctance to release the Zapruder footage has been the cause of speculation which ranges from considerations of their involvement in the conspiracy itself to financially motivated protection of copyright at the expense of an internationally significant investigation.[16]

Despite Time's over-zealous—if not suspicious—hoarding of the film, the importance of its contents could not be forever withheld. In 1975, Robert Groden and Dick Gregory approached Geraldo Rivera with an optically-enhanced version of the Zapruder footage which Groden had created by rephotographing, frame by frame, newly stabilized and enlarged images from a bootleg copy of the Time Inc. footage[17]—an enhanced version of a copy of an original widely understood to be, itself, the subject of manipulation. Risking his job and the possibility of financial ruin, Rivera screened the compelling footage on ABC's March 6 episode of *Goodnight America*.[18]

With the Rivera screening, the phantasmagorian aspects of the footage began to develop more fully. Not only had the footage acquired a crucial evidentiary value uncommon to film images at the time, with Rivera's appropriation the film had become fodder for his journalistic ambition and soon to be sleaze-persona. Recontextualized within the 'now' of mid-seventies television and the 'then' of the just post-Watergate era, the Zapruder footage settled into a spatio-temporal position far away from its Dallas origins. The events portrayed in Zapruder's footage had acquired the marks of time. Optical enhancement, a twelve-year hoarding, Rivera's own particular brand of revelation and a culture

13 For discussions of these issues and other evidence of manipulations or distortions of the original footage see David Lifton, *Best Evidence: Disguise and Deception in the Assassination of John F. Kennedy.* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company Inc, 1988) pp. 527-560; and Robert J. Groden *The Killing of a President: The Complete Photographic Record of the JFK Assassination, the Conspiracy and the Cover-up.* (New York: Viking, 1994) pp.21-24,35,133,142. For lively and ongoing discussions of these matters, access alt.conspiracy.jfk, internet.

14 Zapruder's footage was not sound stock. However, this has not prevented some researchers from analyzing the footage using 'jiggle analysis.' This form of analysis rests on the assumption that sound, and loud sounds in particular, will register visually in the form of 'jiggles' or mild disturbances in the composition of the image.

15 This subpoena was taken all the way to the Supreme Court, with Time Inc. appealing each ruling that required they relinquish the film to Garrison's investigative team. Obtaining the footage was one of the few successful strategies initiated by Garrison.

16 See Hennelly and Pelicoff, op. cit. p.32.

17 It is somewhat disingenuous to call this copy of the footage a 'bootleg'. Groden himself suggests that he obtained his working copy of the film from a New York-based motion picture optical house owned by Moses Weitzman in 1969. Groden describes Weitzman's copy as a "legitimate, first-generation mechanic's copy" of Zapruder's film. Groden neglects to explain precisely how this copy of the film was obtained from its owners when just months earlier they had taken Garrison's subpoena to the Supreme Court in order to prevent its public screening. It seems highly unlikely that an unsuspecting New York post-production house would innocently happen to have a spare copy sitting around.

18 In an interview with *The Village Voice*, Rivera asserts that his convictions were so strong that he was willing to 'walk' if the film was not screened. Rivera also maintains that *LIFE* did not sue him for copyright infringement—for which he took full responsibility—because they were 'blown away' by the reaction to the footage. See Hennelly and Pelicoff, op. cit. p.32.

still recovering from Watergate and Vietnam combine to create a media-event impossible just several years earlier. The film had become less a window onto November 22 and more a filter through which both Dallas and more contemporary phenomena travel, and intermingle. Just as the footage begins to realize its impending hyper-media circulation, so is it forced to undergo increasing scrutiny by a research community eager to employ its high-tech methods in order to climb through the film and back to assassination day.

Shortly after the Rivera screening, *LIFE* sold the footage back to the Zapruder family for one dollar. Zapruder's son inherited the footage and now does a 'brisk business' renting it out for public and private use.[19] Also, partly as a result of the enormous response to the screening of the footage, the *House Select Committee on Assassinations* was struck in 1976 and the investigation into Kennedy's death was renewed.

As the possibility of government scandal and therefore conspiracy became more intelligible to the American public, and as researchers gained more access to assassination material, the Zapruder footage was used more and more as the cornerstone for establishing both the plausibility and the implausibility of conspiracy in Kennedy's death. Featuring detailed maps, clay models and paid-extras, journalists, researchers and filmmakers alike made pilgrimages to simulated and actual Dealey Plazas—enacting recreations based on, or largely informed by, the Zapruder footage.[20]

DEEPER THE PHANTASMAGORIA

The gestures of Jack and Jackie forever recorded on Zapruder's film have also inspired investigations of a different sort. With his trademark camp and unusual prophetic insight, John Waters collaborated with Divine to make *Eat Your Makeup* (1966). In a 1992 interview in *Premiere* magazine, Waters brags that Divine was the first person ever to portray Jackie Kennedy on the screen. Parodying Jackie's consistent calm and composure with ambiguous reverence, Divine relives the fateful day in Dallas in a dream sequence.[21] Imitating her gestures, her body movement and her desperate and panic-stricken grasp for Kennedy's brain matter, Divine and Waters pay an unacknowledged tribute to Zapruder's film. The footage, at this point having only been viewed as a series of stills, very early became the subject of camp-reconstruction. Partly documenting the appropriation of Jackie as an icon within the gay community, and partly suggesting the importance of the footage both in 1966 and in years to come, Waters' film is situated as an early marker of the film's considerable capacity.

In a further attempt to address the complexities of the Zapruder footage, a 1975 performance video tape produced by Ant Farm and T. R. Uthco, *Eternal Frame*, suggests the impending surrender of the assassination to artifice itself. By foregrounding the preparation of the actors—some in drag—and juxtaposing this with their reenactment of the assassination in Dealey Plaza, *Eternal Frame* depicts an event characterised more by parasitic voyeurism and endless, unmotivated mimicry rather than directed consideration or religious historicism. The infusion of Dealey Plaza by eager tourists is an essential element of *Eternal Frame*. The film foregrounds the prurient pleasure of the spectators as they revel in their role as both witnesses to, and participants in, the rather cynical historical act of the film.[22] The artifice of Zapruder's film is highlighted as it is used to trace the simultaneously compelling and repelling aspects of its ritualization.[23]

The Zapruder footage was gloriously born yet again, thanks to the guiding hands of Oliver Stone and the frames of his enormous 1991 pro-conspiracy film, *JFK*. Stone's film was a suggestive and provocative foray into the world of conspiracy theories, using Jim Garrison and his investigation as diegetic devices. Stone recreated scenes from Dealey Plaza while using Zapruder's film as a model for his renderings—in 8mm, 16mm, 3/4" video, colour, and black and white. Zapruder's footage is one of the most obvious and seductive interpretive frames for Stone's film. In the opening collage of *JFK*, Stone used Zapruder's footage to mark both the close of Kennedy's life and the opening of the possibilities its capture on film suggests. In the film's final courtroom-climax, exaggerating Garrison's own 10-time screening of the film, Stone couches Zapruder's now multi-layered footage in a hyperbolic courtroom scene and accents it with intense, heart-pounding music and an over-determined Kevin Costner. The Zapruder footage is the crux of Stone's simulated, political, and brilliant heavy-handedness. Those fateful

19 Stolley, op. cit. p.413.
20 See *Nova*. "Who Shot Kennedy?" (PBS. 15 November, 1988). For texts which recreate and reexamine the Zapruder footage in order to suggest conspiracy see: *Reasonable Doubt: The Single-Bullet Theory and the Assassination of John F. Kennedy*. (USA 1988); *Best Evidence: The Research Video*. (USA 1990); also, Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991 Warner Brothers). For listings of books which reexamine the Zapruder footage see DeLloyd J. Guth and David R. Wrone, *The Assassination of John F. Kennedy*. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980). For listings of audio-visual texts which use the Zapruder footage to support claims ranging from Mafia hit to Castro's revenge see Anthony Frewin, *The Assassination of John F. Kennedy: An Annotated Film, TV and Videography, 1963-1992*. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993).
21 See John Waters, *Premiere*.(May 1992) pp. 34-36.
22 For more discussion of *Eternal Frame*, see Patricia Mellencamp, *High Anxiety: Catastrophe, Scandal, Age & Comedy*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) pp. 96-102.
23 Echoes of Zapruder's footage were also evident in several television shows including a 'Twilight Zone' episode, several news shows and hagiographical specials. For television and film listings of fictional and non-fictional treatments of Kennedy's assassination, see Anthony Frewin *The Assassination of John F. Kennedy: An Annotated Film, TV and Videography, 1963-1992*. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993).

frames also provide a clue to the particularly compelling dilemma of Stone's film: was it a film about the assassination or about the cultural incitement to record and re-record that very assassination? It is this uncertainty that informs our understanding of Stone's production and the tension-filled response that greeted it.[24]

Partly because of Oliver Stone's surrender to the wiles of the image and the simulations it spawns, and partly because of the volatile nature of the subject matter, the seeds for a great debate had been sown. Discussions were both renewed and elaborated, ranging from intensive re-examinations of assassination evidence to debates about the boundaries between fiction, reality and history. Shortly after the release of the film in December of 1991, book stores displayed innumerable related texts, Warren Commission documents and JFK bubble gum cards. Furious letter writing in Opinion/Editorial columns, passionate support, brutal criticism, a plethora of interviews, talk shows, commentaries and JFK television assassination specials are only a small taste of the response. Public debating forums were held, Dallas police files were opened, educational packages sent out. Politicians came forward out of a sense of obligation to make public statements defending themselves against the 'allegations' in the film. Perhaps most incredibly, the CIA files previously locked away until 2039 have been selectively released.[25]

While Stone himself was often implicated in the parodic, political and investigative contexts into which the film travelled, the Zapruder footage was also employed as an excuse to indulge in the Kennedy myth once again. Catching the 'JFK wave' and playing on the theme of a second shooter—generally assumed to be proven by the back-and-to-the-left motion of Kennedy's head in Zapruder's film—*Seinfeld* presented a second spitter, *Saturday Night Live* presented a second puker,[26] and *Picket Fences* suggested the possibility of a second BB Gun shooter. Each show had its own particular twist on the infamous back-and-to-the-left iconographic gesture—imitating, of course, the movements within, and angle of, Zapruder's footage. Also in response to the debate surrounding *JFK* was a plethora of new shows and documentaries which purported to reopen the case and examine new evidence in new ways. Multiple computer-aided simulations of the death scene, mappings of the alleged assassin's bullets and ritualistic, dramatic enhancements of sound and image were all informed by Zapruder's footage. Its increasing presence suggests a transparency. In different senses, the film becomes the threshold to an imaginary and real space where seemingly contradictory rituals are re-enacted. Its status as film is strikingly significant if only because the Zapruder case offers a set of energetic and dynamic possibilities intimately linked to the celluloid image itself. Zapruder's footage has become the medium for farce and fact, confusion and confrontation, catharsis and cultural decay.

BENJAMIN MEETS ZAPRUDER

The swirl and range of activities surrounding Zapruder's film continues to obscure the film itself and the film *qua* film quickly dissolves, becoming intimately linked to the cultural phenomena which infuse it. On the one hand, the sheer excess of the 'film' overwhelms and, on the other hand, invites the analyst's eye. Further, both the indispensability of the film as representational document and, conversely, the film as cultural phenomena is unarguable, situated as it is in the centre of a vast cultural mythology. Infinite postmodern regress, traditional textual analysis, or desperate techno-scientific dissection cannot be adequate on their own as models for understanding the expanding whole of the film.

This paper is by no means a complete history of the Zapruder footage and the iconographic, contradictory significance it maintains. It is, however, an attempt to substantiate the claim that understanding the Zapruder footage and its cultural implications requires navigating a complex and shifting field of other icons, other tragedies and other technological trends. An astute reader will have already surmised that my reading of the Zapruder footage is largely indebted to the work of Walter Benjamin and his melancholic Parisian wanderings. Benjamin was convinced of the iindispensability of employing images—figurative and celluloid—in order to meditate upon what he considered to be a fluid and dynamic history; wherein the past, the present and the future collide in present-tense images. In the spirit of Benjamin, we might speculate that the ability of the image to be continuously resituated and the malleability that this implies offered profound potential for further intellectual inquiry and political action. The death of the aura and the changing patterns of cognition that Benjamin foresaw were, for him, the beginning of a new basis for cultural critique.

Benjamin considered history to be deeply informed by the present and conversely, he considered the present to be deeply informed by that which came before. How the present is precisely informed by the before may have very little to do with linear notions of time and teleological assumptions about history or narrative form. Benjamin searched for a methodology that would support his intuition that images were simultaneously seductive and repulsive, inevitably connoting immanent loss and necessary hope. Most importantly, somewhere within the contradictory and therefore dialectical image was Benjamin's belief that it was only by immersing himself in an image-world that a greater socio-political vision might emerge. For Benjamin, there was no escaping the phantasmagoria.

The phantasmagoric quality of the Zapruder images underlies the thin veil of cohesion and logic by which we negotiate their meaning. Time has shown that in certain contexts, these images poke at this veil, testing the necessary illusion that what is reliable, knowable and

accountable is the material world that will not yield to the seductions of the image. As these images poke and prod, we gain small insights into the malleability of our material reality, our cities, our landscapes. It is, conceivably, the very malleability of these images which offers us insight into the malleability of the material world to which these images are so attached. Possibly, these are the moments that Benjamin called flashes in "moments of danger".[27] Perhaps integrating this into analysis is Benjamin's revolution—or, at least, revolution enough. As such, culturally and historically significant murders cannot help but be drawn into this phantasmagoria. Our return to these moments must also imply negotiating through the images that might inform, compliment or supplant that very moment.

Zapruder's film exists alongside the other interests that have fuelled Kennedy's current-day relevance. These interests range from growing unrest with Gingrich's conservative America, to the rise of right-wing, anti-government militia groups, to the deep anxiety over the inability to return to a safer, gentler, image-free moment in history. Zapruder's footage and its continued circulation might be best elaborated as a metaphor for the nineties rather than a document of the sixties. In the least, Zapruder's footage suggests itself as an apt tool for combining and recombining various debates about the role of images in furthering socio-political understanding of the past and the present. Its ever-expanding frames and cross-contextual familiarity challenge current paradigms.

As time and recontextualization move the Kennedy images further away from their respective moments of origin, their place in the contemporary imagescape seems only to be ensured. Their reference points have multiplied; their meaning has deepened. Their status as images is partly elided by the resonance they maintain both as images and as historical artifacts. A strain of endless appropriation belies their resilience to this very recontextualization. In examining Kennedy's death, it becomes clear that a vital aspect of the event and the myth can only be accessed by acknowledging the role of images in the vitality of both. If we are to examine Kennedy's assassination today, immersion in the flashes of light and specular metaphors attached to his image-life are unavoidable. Returning to Dealey Plaza necessarily implies navigating a particularly ambiguous and tension-filled terrain a terrain largely comprised of photographic imaginings, celluloid speculations and magnetic impulses.

While exploring the vibrant and dynamic life of the Zapruder footage and therefore Kennedy's death, the meditations of Walter Benjamin can facilitate accepting the inescapable contradictions which arise. In exploring the strange life of Kennedy's murder, new light may be shed on the important and prophetic insights of Walter Benjamin.
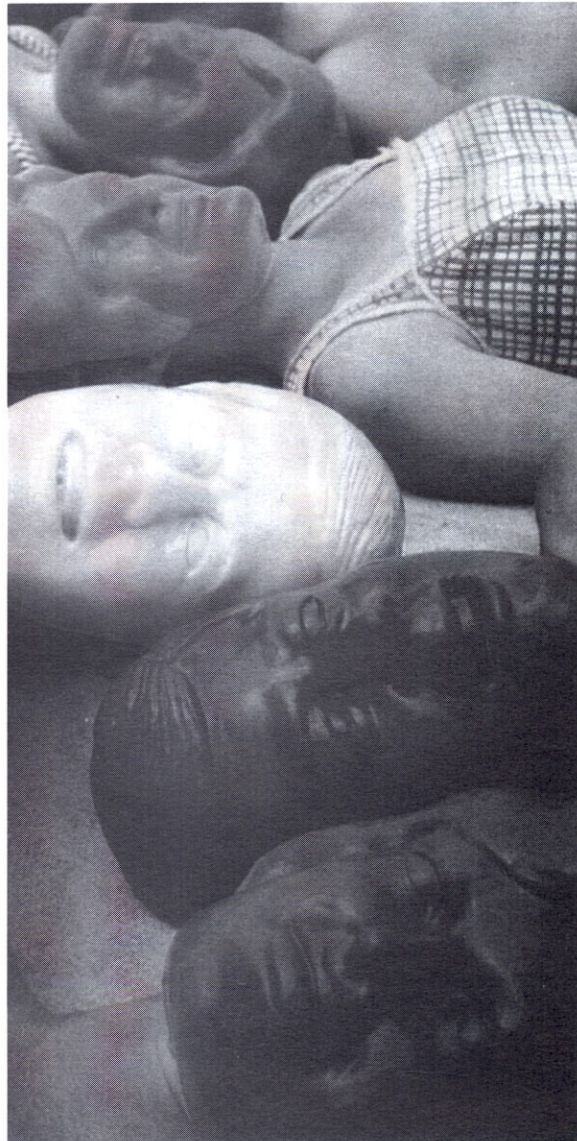
Jack and Jackie sunscreen masks. Robert Halmi, *LIFE*.

[24] Stone's defense of his film varied dramatically depending on the context which confronted him. At times, he was political pundit, armchair philosopher and diehard aesthete. For a taste of his various positions, see Oliver Stone, "Stone's JFK: A Higher Truth?" *The Washington Post.* (2 June, 1991); Oliver Stone, "Stone Shoots Back," *Esquire.* (December, 1991); Oliver Stone, "Who is Re-Writing History?" *New York Times.* (20 December 1991); Oliver Stone, "Oliver Stone Talks Back," *Premiere.* (December 1991); and, Oliver Stone, "Speech to the National Press Club," (15 Jan. 1992) in Oliver Stone and Zachary Sklar,*JFK: The Book of the Film.* (New York: Applause Books, 1992) pp. 403-407.
[25] For more information about the flurry of responses to the film see Oliver Stone and Zachary Sklar, op. cit.
[26] This was a timely reference to George Bush's infamous 'demonstration' while on his 1992 diplomatic visit to Japan.
[27] See "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in Walter Benjamin *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections.* ed. Hannah Arendt. trans. Harry Zohn. (New York: Schocken, 1955) p. 255.

Livin' & Dyin'
in Zapruderville:
A code of representation reality and its exhaustion.

by Tom Mullin

Abraham Zapruder was, arguably, the most influential filmmaker of the last half of the 20th century. Zapruder's film of John F. Kennedy's assassination in Dallas on November 22, 1963 established a new code of reality for the representation of violent death. No longer would the restrained murder of Janet Leigh in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* be accepted by American movie audiences as verisimilitude. The June 27, 1960 issue of *Time* magazine described *Psycho* as ". . . gruesome . . ., one of the messiest, most nauseating murders ever filmed. At close range, the camera watches every twitch, gurgle, convulsion and hemorrhage in the process by which a living human becomes a corpse." Still, Henry Luce, the publisher of *Time* and *Life* magazines, was not blind to change. His deep pockets turned Zapruder's found art into an entrepreneurial enterprise. Through Luce's press, a home movie established a new code of representation. Zapruder revealed the internal 'still life' of movies—moments of penetration, of eruption—separating the living and the dead. Between the frames falls the shadow. America needed to peer into the shadows.

The distance between the average citizen and death had grown during the years following World War II. Hospital intensive care units provided slow motion death—so slow that the distinguishing moment of non-traumatic death became the domain of sophisticated machinery, interpretable by trained eyes only. Meat was wrapped in cellophane far from the stench of the slaughterhouse. Fewer people each year had ever stuck a pig or popped a chicken's head from its body. The mysteries of death were lost to fading memories, hidden behind the walls of hospitals and killing floors and at midnight executions in prisons.

Art has always peered behind the veil of death. Cave walls celebrated death—violent and sudden, capturing the shudder, the grimace, the holes and the blood. Grunewald explored the gruesome agony of crucifixion; Goya, the executions of the third of May. Ruben's Prometheus is portrayed in torture; Frederic Remington's cowboys dash for the timber in mid-gun fight.

In the 19th century, the introduction of the camera offered another mode of representation. Mathew Brady

photographed Civil War casualties, and glass plates recorded the earthly remains of the Doolin-Dalton gang.

By the late 1800's, motion pictures offered glimpses into the motions leading to stillness. The internal construction of the movie contained frozen structures: a world of stillness hidden in a flurry of motion. Sensing this, slow motion was an inevitability. Bonnie and Clyde's prolonged shuffling off of their mortal coils was born in Abraham Zapruder's 8mm camera on November 22, 1963.

In 1967, Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde,* the 'new' representation, was still at a primitive state of development directly echoing Zapruder. Penn was restaging the death in Dallas. The slow motion death of the protagonists seems based on the series of stills from Zapruder's movie which had been prominently featured in the ironically named *Life* magazine. The protagonists are killed in or near their car, ambushed by concealed killers. Earlier in the film, head wounds abounded. (Coincidentally, Clyde Barrow was portrayed by Warren Beatty, who had been Kennedy's choice to portray him as a World War II hero in *PT 109*).

While many of the 'serious' films of the 1960's were in black-and-white, *Bonnie and Clyde* was in color. Monochrome tended to emphasize film as a construct, as well as establish an aesthetic distance. But, Zapruder was in color. That November weekend in Dallas had, after all, offered another version of death by gunshot. Almost everyone (except a few of Henry Luce's employees) saw Lee Harvey Oswald murdered by Jack Ruby before they watched Zapruder's film. But Oswald died according to old filmic codes of reality: black and white, bending over as if from a sudden stomach cramp. Viscera were not visibly sprayed around the entry way to the Dallas jail. Mr. Luce's reviewer may have imagined *Psycho* as the nether reaches of representation — but Luce didn't need a reviewer to know which way the wind was blowing. *Time's* reviewer retracted a negative review of *Bonnie and Clyde* and offered up a favorable opinion. The American public embraced a new code of reality.

The exploding, spurting wound became an institutionalized part of the filmmaker's vocabulary. Blood flowed in increasing measures across film genres: from adaptations of Shakespeare like Roman Polanski's *Macbeth* (1971) to contemporaneous character explorations like Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976); from Robert Altman's revisionist noir, *The Long Goodbye* (1973) to Sam Peckinpah's revisionist western, *The Wild Bunch* (1969). Directors evoked memories of Dallas, employing the icon of bloody, violent death. The spray of blood and brains splashed across the pastel pink of Jackie's suit and the soft, late fall green of Dealey Plaza. (The viewer's eye has a prefiguring of the splash and trajectory of the erupting wound as the shadow of a woman's torso leads to her flaring red dress.)

Filmmakers fulfilled the desire to subvert the horror of the real by providing an enhanced representation of reality. The explosion made the unseen visible. Blood—the spew of red—actualized the representation; slow motion allowed for examination and provided time to ponder and appreciate the mechanics of violent death. The memories of Dallas and the expanding horrors of Vietnam became tame and manageable when compared to 40 foot flowerings of blood on the screen.

Director Sam Peckinpah was ever ready to raise the

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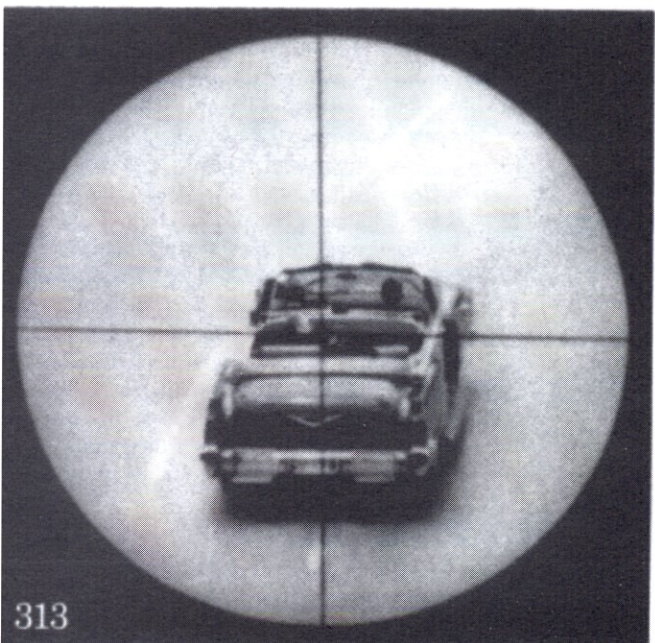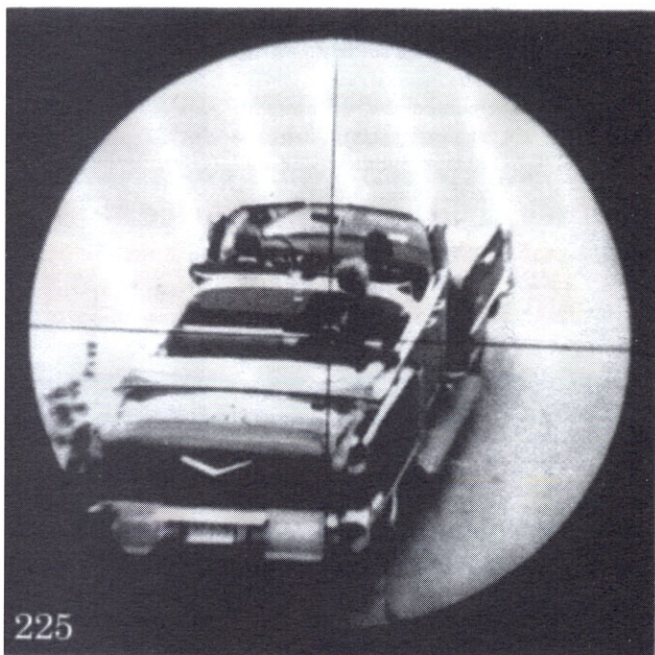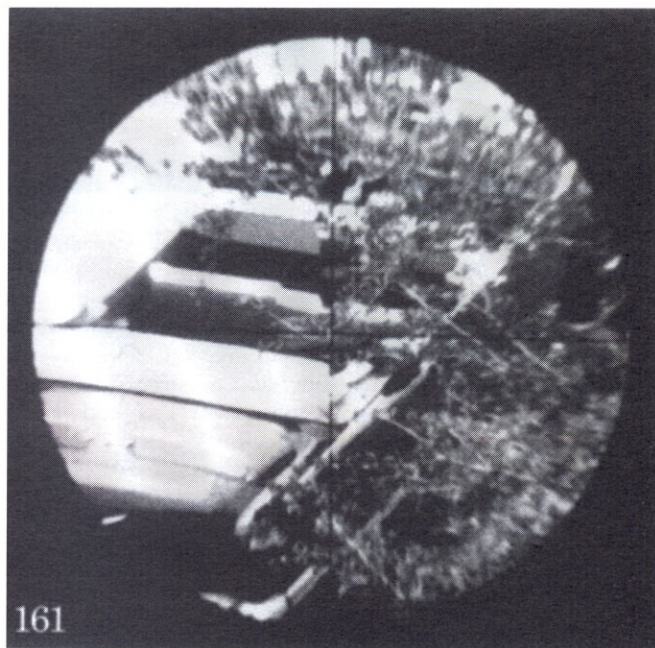
ante of violence. Peckinpah's world view was an echo of Lear: Humans were to the gods like flies to wanton boys. Peckinpah reprises Shakespeare's kids in the opening of *The Wild Bunch*, displaying the thin line between sadism and curiosity, between cool, scientific inquiry and the pleasures of destruction when he voyeuristically observes kids setting scorpions aflame. But Zapruder was an emotional, not moral or ideological icon. Emotions could be called to the service of any idea. The dichotomy of opposing world views embracing the new code was expressed in Zapruder: the last onlooker seen before the president's head explodes is dressed in black and white.

In 1971, Peckinpah found the melodramatic construction of *Straw Dogs* well suited to torturous violence. Without moral ambiguities to clutter enjoyment, the violence becomes pure and righteous. The dichotomy between good and evil seems as clear as the phylogenetic differences were to the wanton boys removing the wings from flies. Torture is transformed into entertainment because the cause is just; and because the cause is just, a happy ending is guaranteed. Melodrama is an echo of the Christian world view—where the good are rewarded after being faithful Christian soldiers.

Quite possibly, Martin Scorsese was satirizing this beatification of a violent protagonist who scourges the morally corrupt in *Taxi Driver*. Salvation and transcendence of evil through violence propel Scorsese's poke-in-the-eye bicentennial gift to the United States. After establishing Travis Bickle as a potential assassin, introducing the politician and setting the stage for an exploration of Abraham Zapruder's camera view, Scorsese blinks. In a restless, revisionistic move, the pimp, not the president, dies.

Taxi Driver unintentionally spawned *Rambo* (1985), *Die Hard 2* (1990), and *Uncle Buck* (1989): violence transcends evil without a hint of ambivalence or satire.

Representation became steadily more exaggerated. The screen was flooded with gallons of Karo syrup and red food coloring, representing violent death by liquid measures, not emotional impact. Symbol and meaning had separated.

The code of reality was dependent on a referent. Zapruder provided a reference for great emotional impact and inherently postulated a world view fraught with chance. The world was a dangerous, savage place where death came even as one was absorbing the adulation of crowds. Death came even while the comforting whir of a 'home' movie camera followed worshipfully through the maze of directional signs and guards astride motorcycles. Death stalked everyone. Little stockboys got off lucky shots through crummy rifles before they celebrated with a Coke, walked past the cops and ended up at the movies. When the code of reality clearly referenced Zapruder, the viewer experienced the terror and pity of a world out of control.

But inherent in the referent was a clear and established protagonist. Zapruder's focus is so single minded that the onlookers standing across the street are top-framed at their bust lines. No one is important but the protagonist. The others are shadows, nonentities, anonymous and literally faceless people.

Initially, the examined death was primarily invested in the protagonists. Antagonists were allowed minimal scene time for their demise. In *Bonnie and Clyde*, the bank employee is allowed to die in close-up, but attention is diverted from the relatively anonymous clerk because the shot is a paraphrase of the 'Odessa Steps' sequence of *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925). Montage meaning and impact are dependent on juxtaposition. The juxtaposed shots are of Bonnie and Clyde. Audience sympathies were dictated with the melodramatic precision of *I Spit On Your Grave* (1977). The clerk has no more identity than the faceless onlookers in Zapruder.

At first glance, one cannot imagine Bonnie and Clyde killing a waitress as Mickey and Mallory do in *Natural Born Killers* (1994); nor allowing thieves to rob individual café patrons as the two too-hip hit men in *Pulp Fiction* (1994) do. Yet, it is worth recalling that Bonnie and Clyde are hipper and prettier than the people they kill. And like Stone/Tarantino's *Natural Born Killers*, Bonnie and Clyde fall into a strange, barely consummated love at first sight; and love means never having to say you're sorry you kill people. In both films, the rural is romanticized. The law is embodied by mustachioed overacting geeks. Fathers are bug-eyed screeching, shrewish old eunuchs given to betrayal and incest. Both films become Nazi wet dreams, purging the world of people with less than perfect Aryan features. Clyde dies when he looks foolish after losing a lens from his sunglasses—a deadly fashion faux pax.

In the past ten years, audiences have found sport and amusement in the destruction of the 'inferior': the folks in the roadhouse of *Natural Born Killers* must die because

they're obnoxious, because they're not hip, because the waitress has been possessed by the spirit of Jack Nicholson's waitress from *Five Easy Pieces* (1970). The sexual and structural puns of that film have become violent reality. People are blown to 'easy pieces'—and the audience finds sport in the condoms filled with blood. (So many exploded condoms—this is a right-wing sex educator's horror story of rubber failure). Within this code of reality lies a code of excitation, where violence becomes foreplay, awaiting an insert shot. The bursting of condoms becomes the same proof of reality as the 'come shot.'

The meaning—the emotional impact of violence—has come to echo an alternative universe's Zapruder film in which all the bullets strike faceless onlookers. For every offense real or imagined,—bad service, bad behavior—death or torture is the only appropriate response. In the darkened theatre or on the living room sofa with the remote control, the audience is the friend of gods who torture and kill. The stars are gods defining an entertaining reality, revealing easy answers and sure solutions, balancing existence and non-existence in their hands.

Those arrogant terrorists/traitors of *Die Hard 2* with lying eyes were begging to have icicles jammed into the sockets. And those witless bandits are burglars every blond boy home alone dreams of torturing. Idols erase the witless and the anonymous. These are echoes of General Loan in the street of Saigon. Loan's murder of a suspected Vietcong during the Tet offensive of 1968 was the subject of a Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph and of a reel of film which shows the blood spurting at least a foot in the air above the dying young man. This was not a mythic death iconized; it is, rather, small and squalid, senseless and off-hand.

When an audience revels in the synchronously timed tortures in *Home Alone* (1990) and *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), it celebrates the pain of a diminished 'other.' These victims lack screen presence. They exude no charisma. They are filmic nonentities the camera wishes—desires—to kill. Their faces allow for no worship. There are no swollen veins of energy onto which an audience can affix for a transfusion of psychic power. The power of the original code of reality is drowning in parody. The meaning of murder is reduced to the commonality of fast food: cheap, mediocre and only vaguely resembling the model on which it was based. When the code of reality is satiated, surrealism inevitably appears—a parody of earlier codes, not revised, but just exaggerated to exhaustion. Like all parodists, the filmmaker is dependent upon an audience memory and familiarity with the original form. Once the source memory has faded, the parody must wither and die like a parasite whose host has expired. We are at that time of exhaustion. Death throes—literally and symbolically—are in their final stages. Film has become a parody, and entertainment has become a parody of the horrors of our century.

It seems appropriate that the century of Verdun and Auschwitz, of year zero in Cambodia and the Gulag, of Rwanda and Hiroshima, should end with gross parodies of violence masquerading as entertainment. For in this century when rules of warfare were codified, the meaning of the rules has been subverted by an escalating war against civilians. Death relocated from the battlefield to the city, from the soldier to the civilian. In a gross parody of 'civilized' warfare, violence became faceless. During the first part of the twentieth century, nine combatants were killed for each civilian death; from the 1930's on, the ratio has been reversed. Pain and torture and death are systemic. There is no great emotional response and none is intended. Filmic murder is now as devoid of humanity as a Tomahawk missile where the only controlling intelligence is staring at a video monitor.

The Zapruder-inspired code of reality depicted the violent death of a mythical figure to a population alienated from nature. The mythic iconography of Zapruder fragmented in the cool fires of repetitions, variations and exaggerations. Revolutionary representations have given way to goofing. No longer does the exploding squib seem the equivalent of Duchamp painting a mustache on the Mona Lisa. Rather, this is like drawing a mustache on Yosemite Sam: merely tracing what has always been there—but claiming the day-glo pen has made all the difference. Or put another way, the moment in Jackrabbit Slim's Diner in *Pulp Fiction* when the 'wind' blows up Marilyn's skirt provides the metaphor of the power of parody: hot air blowing up a phony's ass.

The Technology

Constructions of Evidence and Truth *in American Murder Films*

by
Ken Morrison

by
Ken Morrison

INTRODUCTION

In the last several decades Hollywood cinema has displayed a range of images which transgress important social boundaries between the natural body and the cinematic body, between cinematic death and the idea of death suggested in reality. Matter of fact presentations of mutilated bodies, severed limbs, exploding heads, scenes of annihilation and graphic wounding are of such frequency as to promote the universal fear of violent death or death by annihilation.[1] What I want to argue in this essay is twofold. First I want to put forward the proposal that there has been a shift in attitudes toward the body in Hollywood cinema and that this shift is evident in patterns of destruction, wound style and homicide technique. Second, by comparing homicide techniques in Hollywood films about murder, I will show how bodily zone and wound style have changed from the closed, concealed and even invisible wounds of films such as Psycho to a mortality pose associated with cadaverous death, a contemporary body configuration in which the living body and the dead body are presented simultaneously. My purpose in this discussion is to isolate the shifts in boundaries and conventions which have occurred in the last three decades and to raise the level of debate from a focus on violence and its sub-influences to a focus on Western cultural attitudes toward the body. Because the body is a field of institutional action and a framework of social and political practices, it gives us important clues about social ideas and cultural attitudes related to boundaries and boundary crossings. Here I ask, do the somatic techniques and practices used in American murder films constitute a point of departure marking a "turning point in the history of the body in the West?"[2]

# of Homicide:

After a brief theoretical discussion to establish historical linkage between the body, the technology of homicide and the rise of murder writing as a genre, I have chosen two Hollywood murder films for analysis and review; Alfred Hitchcock's 'Psycho' (1959) and Oliver Stone's 'J.F.K.' (1991)

THE BODY AND SOCIAL LOCATION

All societies assume rights over and display attitudes toward the body at different stages during the life cycle. This attention is especially evident in various social practices of bodily mutilation that take place within the confines of social institutions which serve violent purposes. In Eastern societies, for instance, the binding of women's feet reproduced relations of domination and sexuality in the family; in Western Medieval society the self-inflicted wounding of the body in the form of stigmata served the purpose of religious expiation; and among societies of the south Philippines, institutions of head hunting and head severing served as a defense against grief, rage and mourning.[3] In modern

[1] For further discussion of this issue see Pete Boss, "Vile Bodies and Bad Medicine," *Screen*, 27, 1986, pp. 14-24; and Barbara Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection," *Screen* 27, (1986), pp. 45-70.
[2] Caroline Walker Bynum, "The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Later Middle Ages," in Michel Feher (ed.) *Fragments for a History of the Human Body Part One*, (New York: Zone, 1989), p. 162
[3] For a discussion of the social practices related to body mutilation and their cultural justifications see Frances E. Mascia-Lees and Patricia Sharpe, (eds.), *Tattoo, Torture, Mutilation, and Adornment: The Denaturalization of the Body in Culture and Text*, (New York: State University of New York, 1992); Paul Bohannan (ed.) *African Homicide and Suicide*, (New York: Atheneum, 1967); Renato Rosaldo, "Grief and a Headhunter's Rage," in *Culture and Truth: Remaking of Social Analysis*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).
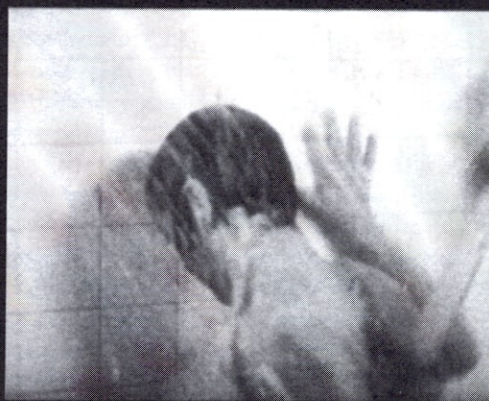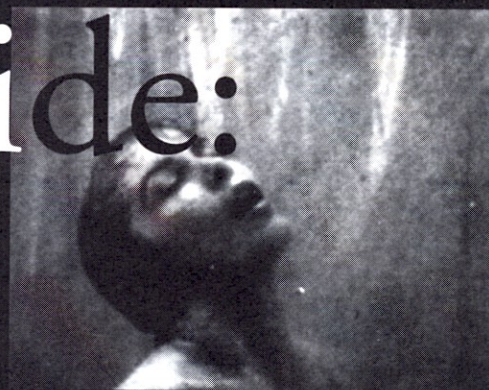
Western societies, the first systematically organized regimes leveled at the body coincided with the emergence of industrial capitalism and Protestant puritanical doctrines. Habits of work, regulation of desire, expression of the abhorrence of excess and the renunciation of the material pleasures of the body in the form of self-denial are among the technology of the mortification of the body still evident in practices such as excessive work, self-control, dieting and fitness.

THE TECHNOLOGY OF HOMICIDE

I use the term 'technology of homicide' as a way of designating the acts, actions, moral principles, scientific measures, police practices, means of explanation and the strategies for arriving at the truth which are set in motion after a murder has been committed. Different societies have vastly different technologies of homicide. For example, among the Azande of Zaire, homicide is believed to be caused by witchcraft rather than individual acts of violence. The procedure the Azande use to reveal the truth behind a homicide is called the 'poison oracle,' a method by which poison is administered to small domestic fowl. From the response of the fowl to the ordeal, the Azande believe they receive true answers to the questions they place before the oracle.[4] As it applies to Western societies, however, the technology of homicide refers to the entire framework employed to determine the 'truth' about what happened. This may include propositions about where the truth lies, the belief in the procedures, the investigation of the crime scene, gathering of evidence, interdictions by law, the production of a chain of evidence and so on. All these elements make up the technology of homicide so far as they are procedures for the production of truth. [5]

THE ORIGIN OF THE MODERN MURDER PROBLEM

The modern murder problem has its origins in early 19th century society with the emergence of the industrial city, the appearance of capitalism and the transition to town economies. With these economies came the concentration of populations, the intensification of the struggle for existence and the need for police functions on a large scale. As societies in the West began to respond to the crime problem, they put into practice an entire machinery for placing the criminal within a system of law, science and punishment. By 1887 Raffaele Garofalo, one of the founders of modern criminology, commenting on the nine thousand murders recorded in Europe that year, stated "who is the enemy who has devastated this land? It is a mysterious enemy unknown to history, his name is the criminal."[6] In these comments, Garofalo draws our attention to two important kinds of developments with respect to

the modern murder problem. First, is that the criminal as a lone murderer is historically new and a product of certain social and historical arrangements. In early societies, murder was carried out within the confines of social institutions which put obligations on individuals to engage in acts of warfare, revenge, headhunting etc. In this sense, 'murderous institutions' prescribed acts whose rules lie beyond individual volition.

A second thing that can be noted about Garofalo's comment is that by the middle of the 19th century there developed specialized techniques and literatures of criminality, including news reporting, detective fiction, medical accounts and scientific investigations which acted to promote the idea that the criminal was a subject of intense interest and investigation. By the end of the century, the 'criminal' is separated out from society by the forces of medicine, psychiatry and law, and this process continues right through the 20th century. As this process intensified, an image was built up of the criminal as the enemy of society and as a result, this led to the conception of the criminal as a threat to the well-being of society and the universal 'fear' of crime. Only when the criminal was conceived of as a monstrous figure motivated by uncontrollable impulses and separated from values of society at large was it necessary to develop a technique of detection, law and punishment which intensifies discipline and subjection.

DISCIPLINARY TECHNOLOGY

In direct relation to the individualization of the criminal is what Foucault speaks of as the age of disciplinary technology. According to Foucault, discipline is a technique that arises at the end of the 18th century and is perfected by the 19th century.[7] It appears in the form of control over the body and refers to the precise techniques whereby institutions concern themselves with bringing the body under control in response to the routines of the factory, the school, the prison and the workhouse. In his work, Foucault goes on to point out that as disciplinary technology acts upon the body it divides it into zones which are subject to controls in the form of rules and interdictions which attach themselves to various social institutions. From this perspective, the development of the modern classroom, for instance, could only have emerged as a space for teaching when controls are leveled at specific zones of the body —arms, legs and head — so as to ensure that direction and attention are confined to the space where the lesson takes place. The aim of disciplinary technology is thus conformity and obedience and it becomes a central dynamic in society because it is a precondition to economic production and wealth. Disciplinary technology is not static but spreads throughout the wider society and is evident in the practices of commerce, schooling, medicine and military life.

After these developments there was the application of disciplinary technology to the deviant and to human behavior in general. This laid down a whole grid of expectations and requirements for human behavior which exerted itself at the level of speech, sexuality and public conduct and served to demarcate the normal from the pathological. As the criminal was conceived of as either 'dangerous' or 'monstrous' and removed from values of the wider society, it was necessary to develop and perfect a technique which intensified subjection. At this point says Foucault "the human body entered the age of the machinery of power which explored the body, broke it down and rearranged it."[8] It was at this stage that the practices of torture and confession perfected themselves in the political and religious realms of society. Both torture and confession, according to Foucault, are 'technologies of truth' in the sense that when applied to the body truth will be produced. Religion and later psychiatry perfected confession, individualizing it to accommodate the work of truth, internal cleansing and self liberation.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF MURDER WRITING AS A GENRE

By the 20th century, those societies which had to confront crime on a large scale put into practice an entire machinery for placing the criminal within the social coordinates of law, medicine and psychiatry. By the end of the 19th century, a specialized technology of murder had arisen celebrated in forensic science, fingerprinting, weapon cataloguing, crime scene evidence, wound and weapons experts. As a result, murder was raised to the level of a literary form as is evident in the works of De Quincey's writing on murder and Edgar Allen Poe's 'Murders in the Rue Morgue' which consolidated the narrative elements of the murder genre by 1841.[9]

Generally, there were four broad elements which preceded the development of murder as a new literary genre. First, was the development of a new mapping of urban space after the breakdown of rural economies and disposition of experience into the private pursuits of individuals. Second, was the rise of the new police functions of surveillance and public order which arose in relation to the new topography of the city.[10] Third, was the need for a closer surveillance of urban spaces which came as a result of the individualization of the criminal and the concept of the city as a corrupting and 'dangerous' environment. Fourth, was the scientific treatment of the violent act. This development brought together criminal justice with scientific procedure and led to the opening up of police techniques to the investigative methods of science, an activity designed to obtain access to the invisible world of traces found at crime scenes in order to determine what really took place. Techniques such as fingerprinting, blood analy-

sis, bullet trajectories, weapons specialists and wound experts eventually brought the spheres of criminal justice and scientific method together. This led to a science of criminal 'man', a science which was destined to become a diagnostic and an explanatory tool.

As a consequence, a whole system of narration emerged informed by an age of the criminal sciences which was to shape the ethic of the investigative disclosure of the truth behind homicide. From this developed a whole language in which murder was to be placed. This was the language of the murdered body, the nature of the wounds, the type of weapon, the details of the crime scene and the presence of the police. The work of detection within literary space was designed to show how murder was to be handled, how it would be investigated and how it would be accounted for. At the center of this system of narration is the detective whose abilities surpass that of the criminal. The presence of the investigator is predicated on the idea that the truth is hidden from view and that the investigative gaze alone will reveal this truth. This genre makes a hero of the detective and coincides with the appearance of law in murder writing. The aim of detective fiction is to bring the murderer to justice and to unravel or disclose the truth.

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[4] For discussion of Azande truth production, see E.E.Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), pp. 120-164.

[5] In the cinema, as in literature, various technologies of homicide respect genre boundaries in which implements, moralities, philosophic propositions and tests for truth operate in a mutually exclusive manner. For example, the vampire genre provides a technology of homicide which contrasts sharply with detective fiction. Here the dangerous individual is the vampire who is beyond control of the law and whose action is the strange fusion of desire and corrupted will. Murder takes place by blood infusion and by blood exchange and the weapons of mutilation emanate from various body zones and environments including items such as teeth, stakes and crucifix. In addition, the wound is in the form of discrete punctures to the body in the region of the neck and carry with them the stigma of a creature who is of another world. The murderous act is thus beyond psychiatry and law and can only be thwarted by religious interdiction. These preferences for stakes, teeth, crucifix, blood exchange and wound morphology constitute a technology grafted to a homicide form and operate to exclude the preferred techniques evident in detective fiction. In the vampire genre, religion is the test for truth over psychiatry, law, or reconstructive investigation.

[6] Raffaele Garofalo, *Criminology*, (Boston: Little Brown, [1891] 1914), p. xii; Michel Foucault "About the Concept of the 'Dangerous Individual' in 19th Century Legal Psychiatry," *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, Vol. 1, (1978), p. 12.

[7] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

[8] Ibid., pp. 137-8

[9] Joel Black, *The Aesthetics of Murder: A Study in Romantic Literature and Contemporary Culture*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), pp. 1-29.

[10] Michel Foucault, " About the Concept of the 'Dangerous Individual' in 19th Century Legal Psychiatry," pp.6-7.

PSYCHO : DETECTIVE FRAMING AND THE TECHNIQUES OF LAW AND PSYCHIATRY

Alfred Hitchcock's 1959 classic, *Psycho*, provides narrative elements which capture the structure of Hollywood murder up to the period of the 1960's. *Psycho* employs three dominant techniques in its structuring of the murder framework: detection is used as a system of producing truths; law is a normalizing agent and psychiatry is sovereign over law in explaining murderous acts.

Psycho is the story of the murder of Marion Crane, a woman who works for a real estate agency in Phoenix, Arizona. Crane, played by Janet Leigh, steals a sum of money, leaves town and drives to California where, after a time, lost and tired, she arrives at the Bates motel. There she meets Norman Bates, played by Tony Perkins, who shows her t o a room and then brings her something to eat. After a brief exchange, he leaves, and she undresses and prepares for a shower. As she steps into the shower, a blurred image comes into view through the shower curtain, raises a large knife, pulls back the curtain and violently stabs Marion. The rapid cutting in the scene, the shifts between victim and attacker, between knife and flesh, is repeated until her body sinks to the floor. After meticulously cleaning the site, Bates drags Marion's body to her car, puts her effects in the trunk and disposes of the car in a nearby swamp.

Shortly after the murder an insurance investigator, Arbigast, played by Martin Balsam, arrives on the scene to search for Marion. Arbigast sets out for the Bates motel where he subjects Norman to a battery of questions: "Do you remember a Marion Crane who may have stopped here on Friday?" "No", says Norman "I don't recall such a person". "Can I look at your books", says Arbigast, "I happen to have a sample of her handwriting." By comparing Marion's hand writing with the false entry she placed in the register('Marie Samuels'), Arbigast reveals an investigative truth: Marion can be traced to the Bates motel where she checked in Friday and stayed the night. This sets the stage for the second murder which takes place as Arbigast enters the house situated near the motel to speak to Norman's mother. As Arbigast arrives at the top of the stairs, Bates, dressed as his mother, comes from a room off the hall and violently stabs Arbigast who falls backwards awkwardly to the bottom of the stairs.

The concluding scene in *Psycho* opens in the court house in full institutional presence of the law and psychiatry. "Well", says the sheriff, "if anyone gets any answers it will be the psychiatrists." This Hollywood stylization of a pending motive and diagnosis serves to structure the way we arrive at the truth and come to understand the murderous acts in the film. Here, law and psychiatry frame our comprehension of murderous acts by structuring what we are shown in the film about Norman Bates. He has over the course of the film murdered at least four people; his mother, her lover, Marion Crane and the insurance investigator Arbigast. He is a psychiatrized murderer in that he talks in his mother's voice and dresses like her when he kills. He lives on the top floor of the family home, in his childhood room which is preserved as it was. He murdered his mother in a jealous rage, snatched her corpse and hid her decomposing body in her room. His weapon, a large kitchen knife with a 14 inch blade, is held downward in a menacing fashion when he murders. As to his mother, she was a clinging, demanding women with whom he formed a pathological bond so to speak. When she took a lover she threw Norman over, and in a furious rage he murdered them both. In unlawfully taking away her body he reconstitutes her and thus restores the relationship to the way it was prior to the murder, at least in his mind. This is why everything in the house is preserved exactly the way it was; his room, her room, the fruit cellar etc. As a result of the bond, the mother forms a dominant part of his personality and acts through Norman. At times, he can be both halves of the personalities, talking to himself in his mothers voice, at others the mother half takes over completely.

With this knowledge of Norman in hand, the narration sets in motion a system of psychiatric comprehension which explains murderous behavior by placing it with within an intelligible framework of acts, motives and impulses. "Norman murders", says the psychiatrist, not because he is a monstrous individual but because "his mother half takes over." "I got the whole story," says the psychiatrist, "but not from Norman Bates, from his mother." "Norman Bates no longer exists, he only half existed and now the other half has taken over probably for all time." "Did he kill my sister", asks Lila? "Yes and no", says the psychiatrist. "When Norman met your sister, this set off the jealous mother, and the mother killed Marion."

Historically, psychiatry became a part of criminal law in the 19th century as a technique for explaining dangerous individuals and murderous acts. In *Psycho*, the grid of criminal justice and psychiatry are put into play by the Hollywood system and this grid is used both as a moral brace and as a technology for producing the truth of the official explanation. Here we see how psychiatry, among the sciences for explaining and curing the illness of crime and homicide, is the technique which provides an interpretation of the criminally monstrous by placing a senseless act onto the plane of intelligible motive.
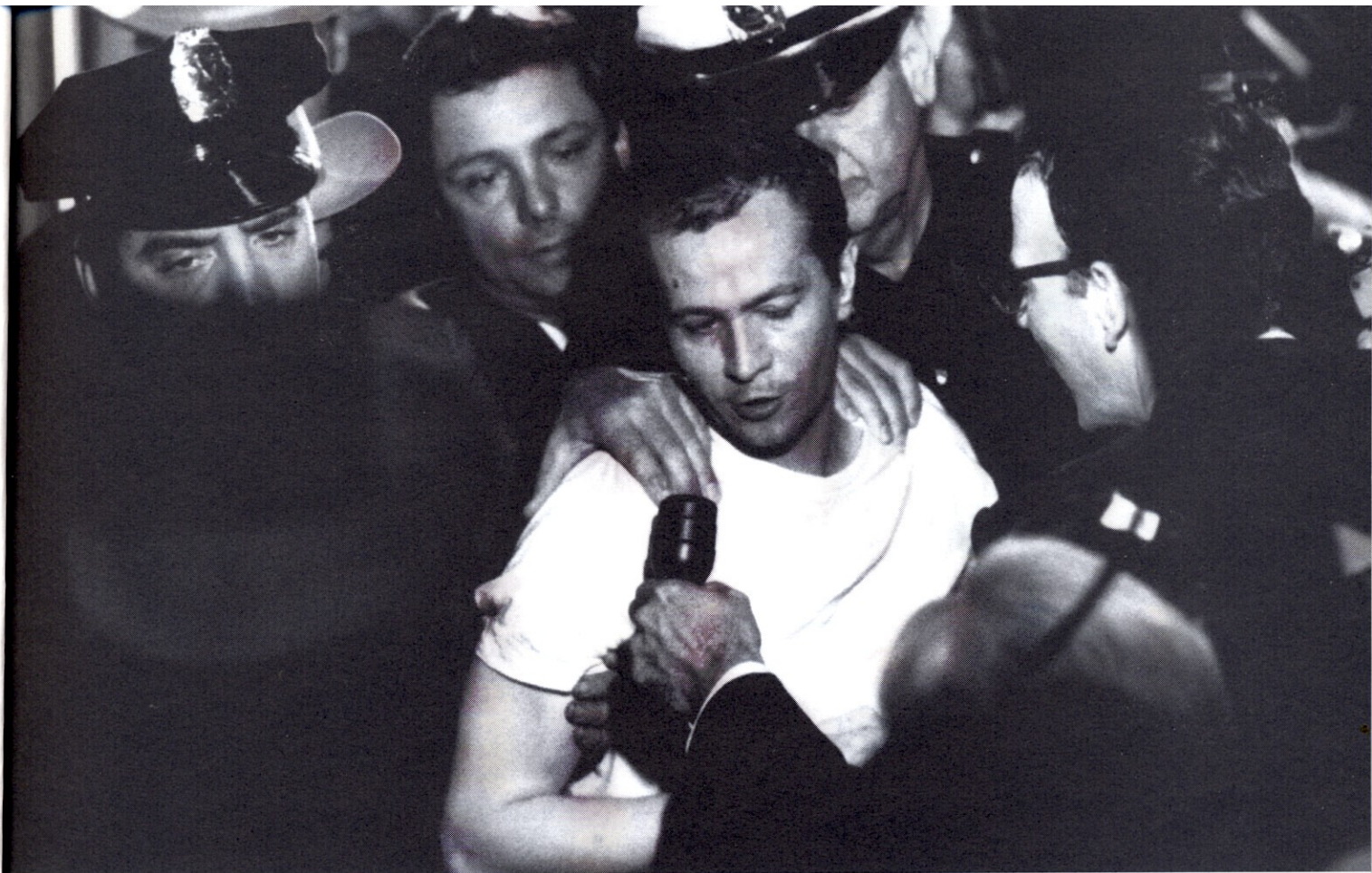
Gary Oldman as Oswald in *JFK*.

OLIVER STONE'S *J.F.K*

A different murder narrative is explored in Oliver Stone's depiction of the Kennedy assassination. Stone's purpose in making the film was to examine the plausibility of conspiracy in the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Largely a depiction of Jim Garrison's failed efforts to bring charges against those whom he believed were involved in a conspiracy, *JFK* is a three hour investigation of the murder of John Kennedy. For its violent scenes, Stone's film draws heavily on the Zapruder footage, a 22 second account of the President's motorcade recording the impact of Oswald's gun fire on Kennedy's body. First aired in 1975 on ABC's *Good Night America,* the Zapruder film publicly shocked millions of Americans for its graphic depiction of the fatal head wound sustained by Kennedy and is central to all reconstructions of the case in two important ways. First, it provides the definitive cinematic record of the assassination, eventually dubbed the "time clock" of the Kennedy murder; and second, it brought to the American public the visual details of Kennedy's head wound in which the physical contents of his head are violently exploded outward onto the rear of the limousine. In a central court room scene in *JFK*, Jim Garrison, played by Kevin Costner, argues the case for conspiracy by using the Zapruder footage as incontro-

vertible evidence that Kennedy was shot from the front, implying thereby a second shooter and therefore a conspiracy. The scene is highly technical in nature and many factual assertions relying on bullet trajectories, army ballistic experts and physical evidence are used to put forward various truth claims about what happened. During the trial scene, frames 223, 224 and 313 of the Zapruder film are used, first to demonstrate when the first shots hit Kennedy, and second, to demonstrate the direction of the fatal head shot which killed him. As the Zapruder film plays itself out, what is at stake in the demonstration are judgments about body positions, gunshots, wounds, timing, shooters, Connally's reaction and the direction of Kennedy's body subsequent to the head wound. Each of these aspects is read forward and backward, repeated and replayed, started and stopped and placed in retrospective and prospective positions to draw out conclusions leading to either conspiracy or to lone-shooter theories.

Earlier it was stated that the technology of homicide includes propositions about where the truth lies, the belief in the procedures, the moral maxims, the scientific measures and the means of gathering evidence to get at the 'truth' about what happened in a murder. In *JFK* the prevailing technology of homicide is scientific in that all the powers of sciences including physics,

forensics, geometry, ballistics, medicine, optical enhancement, audio analysis, computer reconstruction and the like are drawn upon in an effort to reveal the truth in the Kennedy murder and to provide a definitive explanation of what happened.

In Stone's *JFK*, the Zapruder film is minutely broken down into a frame-by-frame analysis of the murder which is accompanied by optical enhancements of the frames recording the impact of the wounds. Wounds in turn are broken down into trajectory paths which are tracked and analyzed to verify the origin and direction of the shot.[11] The bullet, (the so called 'magic bullet') has its own special history and markings (C.E. 399) and is the subject of intense investigative analysis invoking the assertions of the natural sciences such as physics and geometry.

Near the end of the courtroom scene, Stone draws on frames 313 and 314 of the Zapruder footage and methodically presents them in slow motion with visual enhancement of the head shot and of Kennedy's body moving violently "back and to the left," presenting conclusive evidence of a shot from the front, demonstrating a "second shooter" and, by definition, a conspiracy. Stone systematically pursues a line of truth which uses the Zapruder film as an evidential basis to claim that a "team of shooters" killed Kennedy in a military coup motivated by Kennedy's readiness to end the war in Vietnam which, at the time, threatened the prevailing powers of the U.S. military. Yet, in a recent work by Gerald Posner, opposite conclusions are drawn.[12] Using the identical frames of the Zapruder footage, bullet trajectories, ballistic analysis and medical evidence, Posner presents different facts and different truths while all along claiming rigorous scientific analysis.[13]

PSYCHO AND *JFK*: SHIFTS IN THE TECHNIQUE OF HOMICIDE

Earlier I had stated that the technology of homicide involved strategies for arriving at the truth which are set in motion after a homicide has been committed. These strategies are largely technical and moral in nature and their main aim is to provide narrative closure, meaning and ultimately the truth about what happened. In *Psycho* these strategies are put to work by the techniques of investigation, law and psychiatry which function as a test for truth and as an explanatory account of the murder of Marion Crane. These techniques, if we can call them that, provide both narrative closure and explanatory truth when Norman Bates is brought to justice and his motives and acts are examined and explained within the confines of the psychiatric authority. But what about the techniques of murder portrayed in these two films? Both the shower scene and the Kennedy head shot are among the most graphically disturbing filmic images. What kinds of shifts in the techniques of homicide can be observed in these two scenes?

THE SHOWER SCENE

As a murder technique, the shower scene in *Psycho* is one of the most shocking in film history. Marion Crane is violently stabbed to death while a music track magnifies the repeated gestures of the stabbing, and the filmic cutting, famous for its technical ingenuity, amplifies the shocking nature of the murder. But, what is important to notice here is that the violence in the scene is not overt in the contemporary sense of the term. This is so for several reasons. First, the shower scene is technically a *woundless* murder in that the knife never touches the body and is moved away from it in a gesturing that is clearly part of the cutting technique rather than a movement initiated by a murderer. Second, while the shower scene is itself shocking, from a contemporary perspective the shocking quality of the scene exists not in its actual violence to the body, but rather in the power the scene exerts over the ability to transgress what is normal in relation to the body. This means that the shower scene in *Psycho* is not a body-annihilating murder as much as it is a violent intrusion into the normal. In fact, the transgression of normalcy is a recurring theme in Hitchcock's work and this, it seems to me, is what Hitchcock finds so enormously appealing about the murder genre.[14] In the shower scene, Hitchcock's camera is thus exercising its powers over the normal, for what can be more mundane than a shower in which we are undefended against reality. The

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11 The reconstructive work which has gone on around Zapruder and which is still going on to this day has inspired Hollywood murder themes. In *Blow Out* , for instance, a film directed by Brian DePalma , the story line involves an audio tape of a political murder in which a sound technician, played by John Travolta, attempts to match film fragments to an audio tape of a suspected murder. What is interesting is that in the central scenes, the moment of truth is provided when Travolta is able to precisely calibrate sounds on an audio tape to film frames to prove, definitively, that a murder was committed. The Zapruder film has no audio portion and as such there has been much analysis, most of it scientific, to match the only sound recording of the assassination which was obtained by a police motorcycle unit near the scene.

12 Gerald Posner, in *Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK*, (New York: Random House, 1993) claims to present the final and conclusive proof that "Lee Harvey Oswald, driven by his own twisted and impenetrable furies, was the only assassin at Dealey Plaza on November 22, 1963," p. 472.

13 In yet another work entitled *The Killing of a President*, (New York: Viking Studio Books, 1993), Robert Groden, working diligently on the Zapruder footage has produced claims at variance with Posner. Groden, using techniques of optical enhancement, claims that six not three shots were fired and that the head wound at frame 313 was a shot from the front implying proof of a conspiracy. While the techniques and methods are the same, the truths are vastly divergent and contradictory.

14 This is evident in Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt*, where Uncle Charlie, played by Joseph Cotten, a sort of serial killer of his day, engages in a serious critique of the normal and those who live within the confines of the normal.

shower scene, in fact, exercises its optical powers not only in its spectacular cutting technique but in its violent rupturing of the normal. This is also true in regard to Hitchcock's tendency to use the law in a kind of mocking play against the normal which is evident in *Psycho* in at least three central scenes. Third, to the extent the shower scene is not about violent wounding, Hitchcock in reality is staging the murder of Marion Crane as a critique of the normal and that which normalizes just as, in fact, he stages a critique of police powers by exaggerating their capacity to normalize. To the extent that Hitchcock's work can be seen as a series of studies in the power of the filmic over the normal and the violent rupturing of the normal, his lens is always at home in the murder genre.

THE ZAPRUDER-STONE HEAD WOUND

Frames 313 and 314 of the Zupruder film represent one the most violent images in the history of film . Taking only a fraction of a second to play itself out, the image of the Kennedy head wound with its color detail of the aftermath set into motion a new visual image that immediately surpassed the boundaries and taboos with respect to what had been publicly visualized to that time in homicide technique. While it is true that all murders involve violent acts, Zapruder frames 313, 314, 315 introduced a new filmic image of death by fusing together the appearance of the wound with a cadaverous aftermath. In cinematic techniques up to the time of Zapruder, wounds were fatal, brutal, visible, hidden or merely assumed. Wounds were typically sustained during an act of violence or during a murder attempt and were something from which the victim recovered or did not. Wounds in the old cinematic code were transition points used for the entry and exit of characters or to elicit identification with the protagonist. Taboos about wounds in film existed in respect to visualizing the actual impact and the explosive aftermath and these were generally well away from the disfiguring zones of the body associated with the image-generating features such as the face or head. The Zapruder image of the Kennedy head wound, however, introduced a new somatic dimension in the technology of bodies, wounds and homicide. The magnitude of the wound coupled with the convulsive body movements and death configuration of Kennedy's body, played out for the camera the transformation from life to death, so that Kennedy is at once both a living body and a cadaverous body.

What the Zapruder film gave to Stone and thereby to Hollywood was an image of cadaverous death in which the spectator witnesses the transition from the living to the dead in two filmic frames. In Stone's *JFK*, the Kennedy head shot is lifted out of Zapruder and exploited by techniques of close-up, replay, and optical enhancements. Moreover, it is strategically held until the end of the courtroom scene to maximize its impact in an entertainment medium. In this way, frames 313 and 314 are removed from Zapruder and placed within a Hollywood homicide technique. In all cultures, including our own, there are taboos restricting the filming of death, the purpose of which is to mark off by proprietary regulation what is private from what is public, what is sacred from what is profane. The Stone film of the Zapruder footage brought into public view the details of the head wound marking a turning point in somatic conventions in which the head wound became an explorable filmic terrain and an American homicide technique.[15]

[15]Marcel Mauss, *Sociology and Psychology: Essays*, (London: Routledge & Kegal Paul, 1979), p.100. Marcel Mauss, a French social theorist, argued that certain body configurations can be linked to specific cultures and he used the term 'body technique' to describe the relationship between social conventions and body styles. Mauss initially defined body technique as "the ways in which from society to society individuals know how to use their bodies," and went on to point out that we are "apprenticed in these techniques which are products of training and education." In putting forward the concept of body technique Mauss shows how the body is connected to various cultural practices demonstrating the way variations in body activity (eating, walking, marching, fighting etc) are products of cultural conventions. Mauss first arrived at the idea while he was in the United States and drew on a cinematic image to make his point:
A kind of revelation came to me in the hospital. I was ill in New York. I wondered where previously I had seen girls walking as my nurses walked. I had the time to think about it. At last, I realized that it was at the cinema. Returning to France, I noticed how common this gait was, especially in Paris; the girls were French and they too were walking in this way. In fact, American walking fashions had begun to arrive over here, thanks to cinema. This was an idea I could generalize: The position of the arms and hands while walking form a social idiosyncrasy, they are not simply a product of some purely individual almost completely physical, arrangements and mechanisms. For example, I think I can also recognize a girl who has been raised in a convent. In general she will walk with her fists closed."
As Mauss stated, the position of the arms and hands formed a social idiosyncrasy which together comprised American walking fashions. In like fashion, we might conclude that the Zapruder-Stone 'head wound' forms a filmic idiosyncrasy which represents American dying fashions.

CARNIVALISING THE TABOO
- The Mondo Film and the Opened Body -

by Mikita Brottman

Lee Harvey Oswald in the morgue
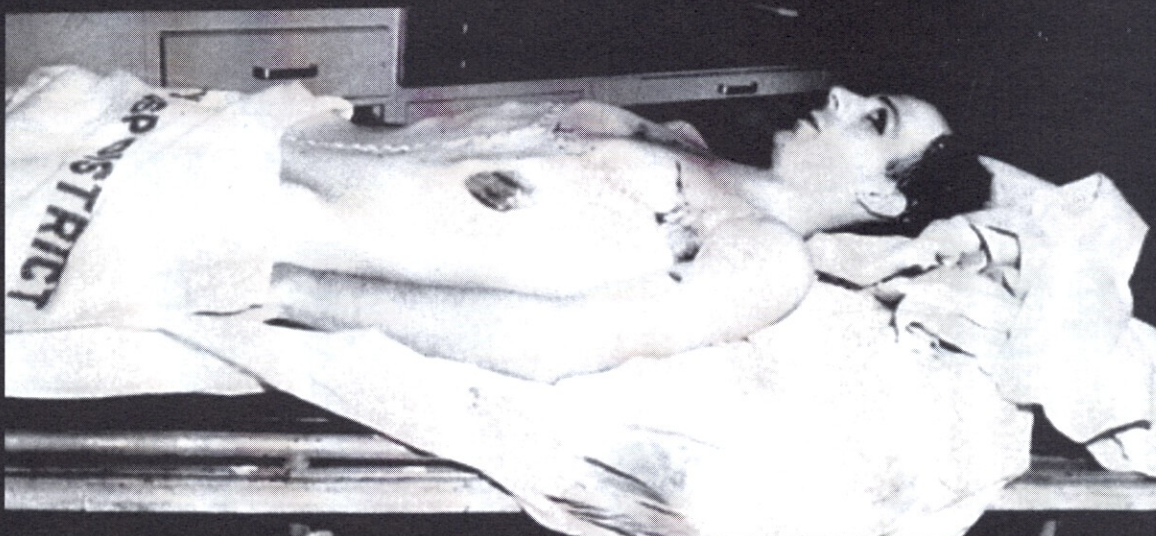
Collective Nightmares: Critical Readings of the Horror Film

A great deal of interest in the fields of film and cultural studies has recently been directed towards acknowledging the contemporary significance of the contemporary horror film, especially since the publication of Robin Wood's "An Introduction to the American Horror Film" in 1979. Horror, of course, has long been a subject of fascination for film critics, ever since Butler's *The Horror Film* and Durgnat's *Films and Feelings*, both published in 1967, though the earlier writers on filmic representations of horror tended to concentrate mainly on the horror 'classics' such as *Dracula*, *Frankenstein* and *King Kong*, rather than the more 'downmarket' movies that are currently attracting a wave of critical attention. Wood, Clover, Krasniewicz et al are more interested in that once neglected subgenre known as the 'slasher' or 'stalker' film. "At the very bottom, down in the cinematic underbrush lies—horror of horrors—the slasher (or splatter or shocker) film," writes Clover, "the immensely generative story of a psycho-killer who slashes to death a string of mostly female victims, one by one, until he himself is subdued or killed, usually by the one girl who has survived." Clover describes the slasher film as "drenched in taboo and encroaching vigorously upon the pornographic," and lying "by and large beyond the purview of the respectable middle-class, middle-aged audience"[1] and of respectable criticism. Clover notes that slasher movies are films that are "never written up,"[2] and Roger Dadoun agrees that, "like the 'mentally ill' relegated to the sidelines of communities, societies and consciences, the horror film leads a marginal existence."[3]

Carol J. Clover's *Men, Women and Chainsaws* is a dramatic and convincing exploration of gender boundary-crossings in the slasher movie; Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine* closely examines the relationship between the contemporary horror film, psychoanalysis and feminism, with special emphasis on Kristeva's theory of *abjection*. Wood's "An Introduction" uses Freud's concepts of the uncanny and the return of the repressed to understand audience reactions to filmic horror, especially to representations of bodily danger and threat. Other helpful work on the slasher in the 1980s and 1990s includes Noel Carroll's exploration of interstitial imagery (a variant of Kristeva's theory of abjection) in *The Philosophy of Horror, or, Paradoxes of the Heart*: Vera Dika's readings of early 'stalker' films, Louise Krasniewicz's explanation of Carpenter's *Halloween* in terms of cultural anthropology, and David Hogan's analysis of sexuality in the horror film. Slasher movies that have received the most critical attention over recent years include Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Wood, Clover, Sharrett, Newman, Vale and Juno), John Carpenter's *Halloween* (Clover, Dika, Neale, Krasniewicz), Meir Zarchi's *I Spit on Your Grave*[4] (Clover, Ebert, Starr) and Sean S. Cunningham's *Friday the Thirteenth* (Dika).
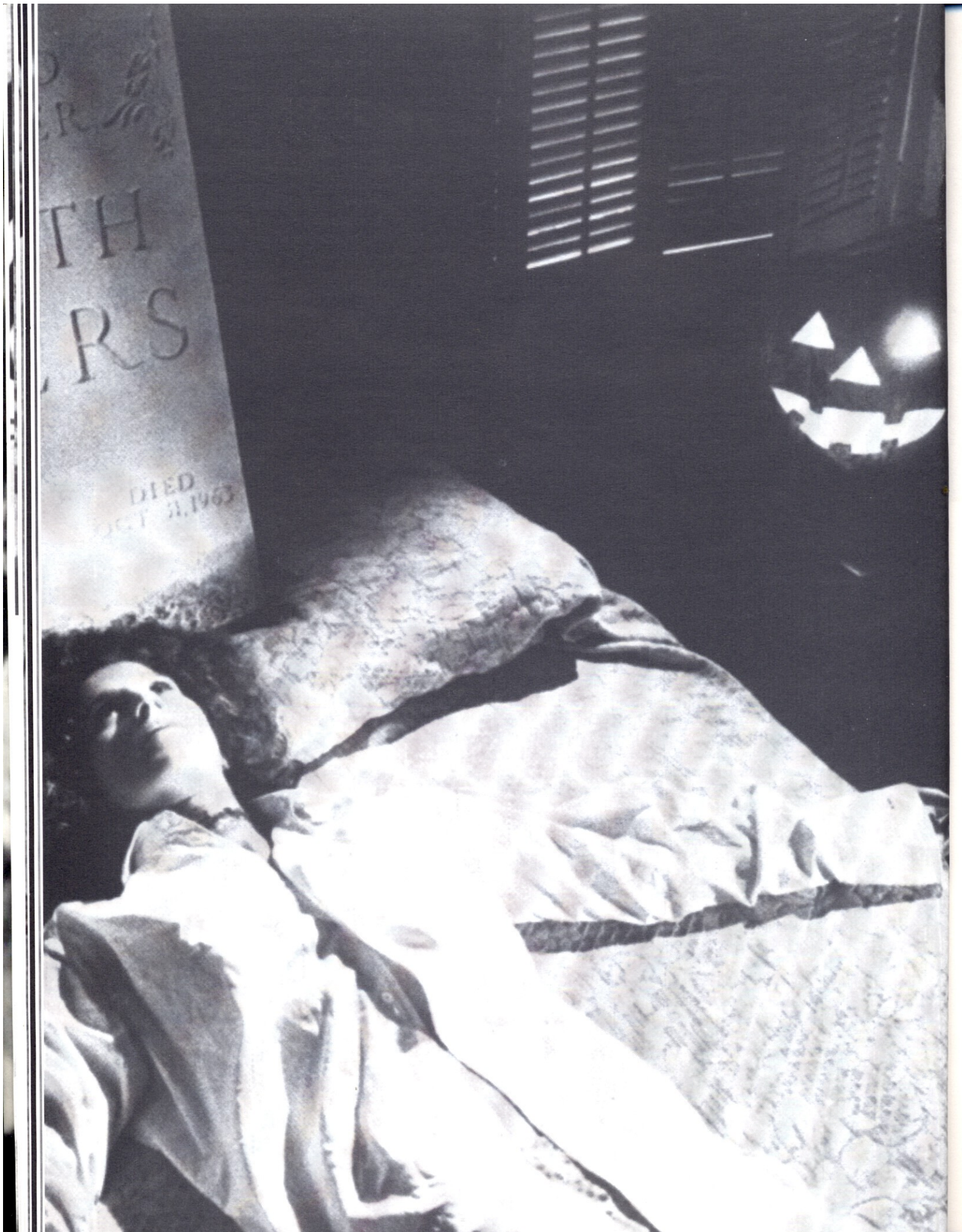
The Radical Possibilities of Neglected Subgenres

This critical fascination seems to have arisen, somewhat ironically, because the slasher belongs to a subgenre almost universally dismissed as trivial, value-less, or 'just entertainment.' Louise Krasniewicz argues that "modern horror offers the moviegoer a story whose seeming purpose is to offer entertainment and temporary refuge from the monotony or tensions of everyday social existence. American narrative films, especially those employing generic conventions, usually claim to demand no more than that the audience sit back and lose itself in the story."[5] Consequently, "[t]hese films' productive exchanges are worth considering no matter what their silly plot or technical merit."[6] Carol J. Clover has argued that the slasher's low-horror qualities are the very qualities that make it such a transparent source for subcultural attitudes towards sex and gender in particular; she writes that "one is deeply reluctant to make progressive claims for a body of cinema as spectacularly nasty towards women as the slasher film is, but the fact is that the slasher does, in its own perverse way... constitute a visible adjustment in terms of gender representation."[7] Vale and Juno argue that low-budget horror can often present unpopular or even radical addresses to social, political and racial inequalities or hypocrisy in religion or government,[8] and Robin Wood claims that the popular dismissal of the slasher movie as 'just entertainment' allows it to present repressed material, as do jokes and dreams, without having to bypass the psychic censor. Wood believes that horror, for him the by-product of cultural crisis and disintegration, is "currently the most important of all American [film] genres and perhaps the most progressive, even in its overt nihilism."[9] And Tania Modleski has argued that the slasher film "does <u>not</u> promote the 'specious good' (but indeed often exposes and attacks it)" and "does <u>not</u> ply the mechanisms of identification, narrative continuity and closure to provide the sort of narrative pleasure constitutive of the dominant ideology."[10]

Horror and Hard Core

At the same time, an increasing amount of critical attention is being devoted towards the genre of hard core pornography (cf. Williams, Crabbe, Day & Bloom), and for very similar reasons. Clover points out that "[p]ornography ...engages directly (in pleasurable terms) what horror explores at one remove (in painful terms) and legitimate film at two more."[11] Like the slasher movie, the hard-core porn film is governed by a series of rigid generic conventions which allow this textual form - unhindered by narrative variations or structural complexities - direct access to the viewer's unconscious, thereby attaining the potential for adjusting mechanisms of identification, gender representation and so forth. Hard core also has the advantage over the slasher film of representing 'actual' footage of sexual acts performed specifically for the camera (and therefore for us, the viewers) in a dramatic literalisation of André Bazin's description of the special power of

the photographic image.[12] This is only one of the ways in which the hard core sex film will almost always be more explicit than the slasher. A killing simulated with the latest techniques in special effects can represent bodily disintegration and dismemberment far more vividly (and possibly even more credibly) than if the death were 'real,' but the slasher movie, however technically adept, cannot reveal the violation of the physical body in the same way that hard core can show 'actual' sexual congress, although the conclusions of writers like Linda Williams suggest that the fusion of horror and hard core might involve some extremely radical possibilities.[13] To understand these possibilities, it is necessary to turn our attention away from the slasher movie and focus instead on a far darker and more disturbing kind of picture: the Mondo film.

The 'Other' Film: Mondo Cinema

Perhaps surprisingly, or perhaps not, no film critic to date has dared to pay significant attention to the snuff movie. Filmic representations of the opened body in the mainstream slasher film have attracted substantial analysis from those who claim to be working with movies that are "neglected" (Vale and Juno), "ignored" (Newman), "repressed" (Clover) or "taboo" (Dika). If, as Clover has claimed, the slasher movie is the repressed of the mainstream Hollywood thriller, then the repressed of the slasher movie is the snuff film: the cinematic presentation of actual bodily death. More than any other film style or genre, the snuff movie is that horrifying, unmentionable

[1] Carol J. Clover, "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film" in James Donald, ed., *Fantasy and the Cinema* (London: BFI Press 1992), p. 91.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] Raymond Dadoun, "Fetishism in the Horror Film" in James Donald, ed., *Fantasy and the Cinema* (London: BFI Press 1992), p. 44.

[4] More of a 'stalker' movie (according to Vera Dika's definition of the term) than a traditional slasher, *I Spit on Your Grave* is generally included in most discussions of the slasher genre due to its brutal 'serial' killings and its use of the 'final girl' motif discussed in detail by Clover.

[5] Louise Krasniewicz, "Cinematic Gifts: The Moral and Social Exchange of Bodies in Horror Films" in *Tattoo, Torture, Mutilation and Adornment: The Denaturalization of the Body in Culture and Text*, Frances E. Mascia-Lees and Patricia Sharpe, eds. (New York: SU of New York Press,1992), p. 33.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 45.

[7] Clover, p. 126.

[8] V. Vale and Andrea Juno, eds., *Incredibly Strange Films. Re/Search 10* (1986), p. 84.

[9] Robin Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film" in *American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film*, edited by Andrew Britton et al., Reprinted in *Movies and Methods* vol. 2, edited by Bill Nichols, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, U of California Press 1985), p. 203.

[10] Tania Modleski, "The Terror of Pleasure: The Contemporary Horror Film and Postmodern Theory" in Tania Modleski, ed., *Studies in Entertainment* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1986), p. 48.

[11] Clover, p. 93.

[12] André Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, translated by Hugh Gray (Berkeley: U of California Press 1976) vol. 2, p. 192.

[13] Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California Press, 1989), pp. 100-101.

Halloween

'Other' film of sustained terror referred to by Thierry Kuntzel: "(t)he 'Other' film is what the classic narrative film must always learn to conceal—a film wherein genre barriers would collapse completely, the protagonist would not even find a place in the flow of the narrative, the spectator-subject would never be reassured, and so on.[14] The 'Other' film would be a nightmare in which the manifest content of the dream is entirely replaced by those latent dream-thoughts which fear the light of consciousness and are artfully disguised in the dream's manifest images.

Most of the evidence supporting the existence of genuine snuff movies consists of either anecdotes, hearsay, or popular urban myths. Many people claim to have watched such films, or know of somebody who owns one, but evidence for their existence is suspiciously scanty (as testified by Kerekes and Slater in their book *Killing for Culture*). Descriptions of alleged snuff movies are often recounted, but rarely substantiated. Anecdotes usually revolve around the film where a village full of peasants is gunned down at dinner, the film where two young girls are taken into a field and tortured, the film of vagrants being fed to a lion, and so on. If films of this nature do exist in underground film circles, then they are extremely rare, and very closely guarded. Far more widely available are films made on the bandwagon of snuff rumours and hearsay, such as Michael and Roberta Finlay's none-too-subtly titled *Snuff* (slogan - "Made in South America, where Life is Cheap!") which includes such tricks of staged realism as the audible voice of the director and cameramen, film reel 'running out' and an abrupt, final cut to a blank screen. Another example of the pseudo snuff movie, *The Evolution of Snuff* (slogan - "with a script that was written more by reality than invention") finishes with an unidentified masked man, disguised by wearing a paper bag over his head, offering his excuses for participating in the film.

Somewhat more commonly available amongst connoisseurs of underground horror is what has come to be known as the Mondo film: compiled camera footage of murders, suicides, assassinations and other real-life disasters. Mainstream Mondo films originally became popular in the 1960s, when films like *Mondo Bizarro*, *Mondo Balordo*, *Sadismo* and *Taboos of the World* tried to capitalize on the original 1963 success of *Mondo Cane*. The Mondo films of the 1960s featured (often faked) catalogues of bizarre practices from around the world, such as dog-eating in the Phillipines, tribal fertility rituals and South American cargo cults. The Mondo film of the 1990s has gone underground, and is not only more vivid and explicit than the original Mondo bandwagon of the 1960s, but is perhaps the nearest thing to a genuine snuff movie that contemporary cinema has to offer. Today's Mondo films such as *Shocking Asia*, *Violence USA*, *Man Man Man* and *Burn Baby Burn* consist of unedited police and newscamera footage too graphic to be shown on television, including film of the L.A. riots, the Heysel Stadium disaster in Belgium, police raids and shootings, stakeouts, air crashes and vehicle wrecks. Other films, such as *The End*, *Faces of Death*, *Death*

Scenes 1, *2*, and *3* and *The Killing of America* rely more heavily on amateur or police camera-work, Vietnam war footage, stills of murder and suicide victims, mortuary scenes and close-ups of dead bodies. The footage is occasionally held together with a loose documentary-style commentary but sometimes left to speak for itself, or backed by an appropriate musical soundtrack. Originating in Italy, the Mondo film has a massive cult following on the underground movie circuit; Mondo films are now produced in Europe, China, Japan and - of course - America, with certain 'classic' clips or sequences of footage (such as the Kennedy assassination and the Jonestown massacre) showing up again and again, from film to film. Mondo films are difficult to get hold of but highly sought-after; their audience tends to consist of those who are fascinated by true crime and criminology, those with an interest in Satanism and the occult, but chiefly of that same group of thrill-seeking adolescent male voyeurs that comprises the audience for the slasher movie.

The Killing of America

One of the more fascinating examples of the Mondo film is Sheldon Renan's *The Killing of America*, produced by Mataichiro Yamamoto and Leonard Schroeder. Unlike many other Mondo films, *The Killing of America* includes a documentary-style script which attempts to provide some kind of commentary on the presented footage, rather than simply linking shots according to circumstances of death (assassinations, murders, suicides...) or connecting unrelated footage through an appropriate (or inappropriate) soundtrack. If *The Killing of America* is somewhat more intelligent and self-conscious than the average Mondo film, it is representative of the genre in its obsession with open-wound sequences, its use of slow-motion repeats and its unflinching presentation of graphically disintegrating human bodies.

The Killing of America opens with a grim promise, with the words printed on the screen as they are spoken, as if for extra effect: "All of the film you are about to see is real. Nothing has been staged." The documentary-style voiceover then goes on to relate a series of (now grimly anachronistic) crime statistics—that America has 27,000 murders a year, that it is the only country to have a higher murder rate than countries at civil war, such as Cambodia and Nicaragua, that it produces a murder victim every twenty minutes, and so forth. This commentary accompanies footage of police shootings, scenes of bodies on slabs in a mortuary, and incidents of extreme violence at race riots. The following section incorporates film of the attempted assassination of President Reagan, with a secret serviceman being lifted off his feet by a gunshot in the stomach—this is shown several times, and in slow-motion—followed by slow-motion footage of the Kennedy assassination from a number of different angles. The shooting of Lee Harvey Oswald is also shown in slow-motion, as are race riots after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., police street shootings, and the killings at Kent State University

Anton LaVey in *Death Scenes*

in Ohio. This section also includes U.S. soldiers shooting Vietnamese citizens—in particular a close-up shooting in the head and a close-up of the dead body, George Wallace, Nixon's electoral rival, shot in the back of the head (in slow motion), the assassination of Robert Kennedy and a (brief) contemporary interview with Sirhan Sirhan. We are also shown security camera shots of a supermarket hold-up and shooting in slow-motion and close-up, stills of murder victims, footage of a large hotel fire, films of on-camera suicides with people throwing themselves from buildings, hanging themselves and shooting themselves in the head, followed by close-up stills of the dead bodies.

The next section of the film moves on to chart the rise of the serial killer, with the documentary voiceover condemning the lenience of prison sentences, the madness of urban streets, and frightening yearly crime statistics. Film in this section includes footage of an urban sniper, photos of his body after the police had shot him and photos of the bodies of his victims, footage of Charles Manson in police custody and stills of his victims, footage of David Berkowitz in police custody and footage of the Jonestown massacre (with authentic soundtrack). This is followed by film of a terrorist taking over a TV station and taking the newscaster hostage, Ted Bundy in court, an interview with Ed Kemper on death row describing his killings, the exhumation of bodies of murder victims, more police shootings in slow motion, open wound sequences and close-ups of dead bodies. The film ends with the words "while you watched this movie, five more of us were murdered. One was the random killing of a stranger."

The Killing of America is an arresting film. Even though these 'live' deaths are generally much less vivid and drawn-out than the graphic technicolour axings and knif-

ings of the slasher movie, what shocks in the Mondo film is a combination of the sheer numbers of killings witnessed, along with the *frisson* of horror in the realisation that what is being shown, however unsteady the camerawork and picture quality, is really happening 'in the flesh.' What is especially interesting about this film in particular is the strongly reactionary and moralistic tone of its documentary voice (criticising the unlimited availability of weapons, sympathising with police problems and so forth) coupled uneasily with a compulsion to repeat particularly disturbing images again and again, in slow-motion, and from a variety of angles. The typical Mondo film, like the *Death Scenes* series, comes to terms with its presentation of gratuitous violence in a generally unproblematic way, through the use of an explanatory, deadpan voice-over (or, as often, blankly descriptive subtitles). This uncomfortable juxtaposition of a paternalistic, moralising voiceover with an obvious voyeuristic relish in the more brutal scenes of bodily fragmentation gives the final impression of a film not really at ease with itself, its direction or its intent.

Death Scenes

A movie far more successful in coming to terms with its own purpose and design is the blistering *Death Scenes*, produced by Nick Bougas, written by Nick Bougas and F.B. Vincenzo and released by Wavelength productions, a Californian corporation, in 1989. *Death Scenes* is introduced and narrated by the famous occultist and leader of the church of Satan, Dr. Anton Szandor LaVey, who describes the film in his introduction as "a road map featuring the many avenues by which we encounter death... a brutally graphic collection of crime scene photographs... a tattered collection of horrid indiscretions, a true necronomicon." "What mysterious force draws us to such a dark, challenging subject?," enquires LaVey in his sardonic monotone. "That is a question that you, the viewer, must ask yourself, for you have chosen to join me in this unnatural participatory ritual, this tour of relentless human folly."

The film is basically a catalogue of grisly police photographs from death scenes in 1930s-40s Los Angeles, arranged according to manner of death; LaVey, a spectacularly deadpan narrator, explains the circumstances of the death presented in each picture, all the time backed up by psychotic organ music. The first section of *Death Scenes*,

14 see Thierry Kuntzel, "Treatment of Ideology in the Textual Analysis of Film," in *Screen*, vol. 14, no. 3.

suicides, includes photographs of bodies killed by shotgun blasts, dynamite, self-immolation, carbon monoxide poisoning, the ingestion of poison, hanging, hari kiri, the slashing of veins and starvation. The second section, murder-suicides, involves photographs of death by evisceration, bludgeoning, torture, drowning, stabbing and decapitation. The film's chief segment presents graphic photographs of murder scenes, including bodies found in trunks, bodies with their throats slashed, bodies that have been burned, beaten and battered to death., Mafia shotgun murders, more decapitations, child murders, the victims of sex crimes, policemen killed in action, and a selection of discarded and mutilated torsos. The penultimate section, accidents, includes the bodies of a dentist and his patient killed by the inhalation of nitrous oxide, bodies killed in fires and a catalogue of auto wrecks. The film concludes with footage of war scenes, military executions and scenes from prisoner-of-war camps. *Death Scenes* runs for roughly eighty minutes and includes over eight hundred photographs. The film was popular enough to lead to a pair of sequels: *Death Scenes 2* picks up where volume 1 left off, beginning with atrocities from World War 2 and moving forward to the present day, including "Manson murders in colour, on-camera suicides and more slayings and tragedies." *Death Scenes 3* contains "ultra-graphic footage of global unrest, accidents of birth, executions, autopsies" and so on.

What makes *Death Scenes* a more unified and integral film than *The Killing of America* is its unflinching attitude towards the violent deaths of the exhibited cadavers. Instead of the didactic and condemnatory voiceover so at odds with *The Killing of America*'s perverse repetition of footage, *Death Scenes* includes a soundtrack and direction which is clearly at ease with the film's chief purpose: to shock and thrill the voyeur. The careful montage of photographs ensures that the viewer does not become overwhelmed; instead, the narrative pitch is allowed to build in intensity, reserving the most harrowing images until the end of each sequence, leaving the viewer with a morbid anticipation of what will be next. The background circus organ music, rather than detracting from this intensity, serves rather to enhance the film's mood of uncanny abandon. Much of this is due to the words and narrative delivery of LaVey, whose wry summary of each death scene is laconic without verging on the droll. He concludes his dark narrative with a brief rhetorical coda:

> Ladies and gentlemen, what, if anything, is to be gained by reviewing this grim series of stark images? Do we find further proof that crime does not pay, or a greater realisation? Only through the bold confrontation with man and his mortality can we fully comprehend the importance of living life to its fullest, to pursue in true fashion the admirable goal of life with honour, death with dignity.

Functions of the Slasher Movie

Mondo films like *Death Scenes* and *The Killing of America* serve all the functions of the traditional slasher film (but more lucidly and explicitly), and go much, much further. These functions are many. Primarily, like the audience of the Mondo film, the audience of the slasher film is predominantly teenaged (or slightly older) and predominantly male; Clover has pointed out how it seems clear from the maleness of the majority audience that the slasher film speaks deeply and obsessively to male anxieties and desires.[15] James Twitchell (among others) has indicated that the contemporary horror film functions as a style of *rite de passage* for the adolescent male, warning of the consequences of socially inappropriate behaviour. The overdetermination of symbols and archaic references in the traditional horror film foregrounds its relationship with folklore, early literature and the oral story, as do its free exchange of themes and motifs, archetypal characters and situations, and the accumulation of sequels, remakes and imitations. Louise Krasniewicz, analysing the way bodies are used in slasher films and in societies compelled to make and view them, believes that the anticipated and necessary failure of the film's characters and viewers to learn the lessons encoded by the slasher film results in endless sequels and spin-offs that perpetuate the exchange of moral lessons and proper behaviour needed to govern unruly bodies in human societies.[16] Lévi-Strauss has argued that the dominant myths of a society are the direct representation of a shared psychic problematic, shared not on the basis of any mysticism or telepathy, but on the basis of the dominant group's regulation of their common obsessions through repetition in re-presentation.[17] Stephen Prince regards the horror film as a compulsive symbolic exchange in which members of a social order nervously affirm the importance of their cultural heritage.[18] He believes that horror, like Mondo, is concerned with the social aspects of both individual and group identity when they address the persistent question of what must be done to remain human.

Taboos are used to establish the social/antisocial as well as the human/animal line, with all 'others' being categorised apart from the social body with animals and dangerously antisocial people. Creed argues that the central ideological project of the popular horror film is purification of the object through "descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct."[19] In this way, she argues, the horror film brings about a confrontation with the object (the corpse, bodily wastes, the monstrous-feminine) in order, finally, to eject the abject and re-draw the boundaries between the human and non-human. Like most myths, the text of the horror film tells the tale of broken taboos, or chaos and disequilibrium, directly in order to reinforce the taboos and social equilibrium of the world outside the myth. In other words, the horror story is a stabilizing narrative, developed to form and acculturate the adolescent male.

Another reason why the horror film is regarded as especially appropriate and meaningful to the adolescent audience is because it re-enacts, in a narrative fashion, the alienation many adolescents feel from their changing bodies, pathologised as monstrous, outlandish and stigmatised. Sobchack claims that in all horror films, terror grows from the fear that we are forever bound to that weak, ani-

malistic part of our bodies which may turn on us any minute and reveal us to be non-human.[20] As Barbara Creed and Carol J. Clover have both testified, many horror films deal with issues like menstruation (*Carrie*), masturbation (*Dressed to Kill*), nocturnal emissions (*Nightmare on Elm Street 3*) and, in particular, the body of the adolescent child—often the girl—out of control (*Carrie*, *Firestarter*, *The Exorcist*). The unease and uncertainty many, if not all adolescents feel towards their rapidly reforming bodies is literalised in the horror film's narrative of bodily fragmentation, dismemberment and collapse.

The Opened Body and the Return of the Repressed

The Mondo film, far more than the slasher, is the kind of film that deals almost exclusively with issues of the human body: the opened body, the body in panic, the body in threat, the body in death. Just as the most explicit hard core pornography reveals as much as possible of the labial area and vaginal opening (in the 'split beaver' or 'open box' shot), so the most sought-after Mondo films are those which show the most vivid evidence of the 'real' opened body (spilt blood, brains, intestines or bodily fluid). This connection between pornography and Mondo is quite significant: it is interesting to note that Freud linked the female genital organs to the *unheimlich*, the uncanny. "It often happens," writes Freud, "that neurotic men declare that they feel there is something uncanny about the female genital organs. This *unheimlich* place, however, is the entrance to the former *heim* (home) of all human beings, to the place where each of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning."[21] Clover has noted that "it is no surprise that the rise of the slasher film is concomitant with the development of special effects that let us see with our own eyes the 'opened' body."[22] Lacan believed that the primal scene is always conducive to trauma, and it has been argued that the horror text's consistent release is in the displacement of the primal scene's violence into death.[23]

One of the conclusions reached by Noel Carroll in *The Philosophy of Horror* is that what creates fear is evidence of things *out of place*, things that defy categorisation. Carroll goes on to enumerate various classifications of what he describes as the *interstitial*, from massivication and magnification (as in giant apes, killer rabbits) to horrific metonymy (bats, rats, spiders), to the bodily (saliva, blood, feces) and the morally interstitial (psychopaths like Norman Bates, committers of incest, and so on). Carroll's theory of the interstitial—essentially a broader version of what Kristeva describes as abjection—has its difficulties, not least of which being that the horrific nature of the interstitial depends largely upon context (there is little of terror, for example, about blood on a steak, shellfish in a seafood restaurant or manure on a ploughed field), but Carroll's theory is essentially a useful one. Kristeva points out that the critically impure is that which is based on a natural 'loathing'; anthropology suggests that there is nothing 'loathsome' in itself , since the 'loathsome' is that

which disobeys classification rules particular to a given symbolic system. It has long been testified that what causes fear and horror (and also, in a different context, what causes comedy and laughter) is evidence of an absence of bodily control, witnessed most clearly by the collapse of bodily boundaries, and the external appearance of things that should properly be kept inside. Anything which protrudes from the body or leaves the body's confines is considered distasteful and grotesque, and this is partly why taboos have developed around bodily elimination such as defecation, menstruation, urination, sweating, blowing the nose, sneezing and ejaculation, since these are all acts which are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world. Freud supported, and elaborated on, Schelling's definition of the uncanny as something which ought to have remained hidden, but has come to light.

Dismemberment and Display

Quite understandably, the Mondo film is more shocking and frightening than the traditional slasher or other styles of horror film since its lack of narrative commitment or—as often—structural cohesion means that the entire film can be devoted to issues of the ex-liminal body. Both *Death Scenes* and *The Killing of America* contain grisly catalogues of blood spilling out of wounds, brains emerging from open skulls, dismembered torsos, broken joints, eviscerations and bodily fluids. Both films involve a network of fantasies relating to the body—the body dismembered or divided into pieces, the display of organs and viscera, the transformation and alienation of internal objects: a relentless depiction of the abject and interstitial which suggests why it is the Mondo film—unlike its pale cousin, the slasher—that deserves to be understood as the secret taboo film of western culture, ignored (unsurprisingly) by critics of the traditional horror film, and regarded by most people with that uneasy combination of loathing and compulsive curiosity by which, in this culture at least, we have come to identify a taboo.

Users and critics of pornography have amply testified how the simulated erotica of soft core porn is generally more effective, more arousing and certainly more cinematically visual than hard core's representation of real human bodies engaged in sexual intercourse. If Baudrillard is right that the boundaries between the real and the televisually represented have become so blurred that it is beside the

15 Clover, p. 125.
16 Krasniewicz, p. 46.
17 Discussed by Donald Greig in "The Sexual Differentiation of the Hitchcock Text" in James Donald (ed.) *Fantasy and the Cinema* (London: BFI 1989), p. 182.
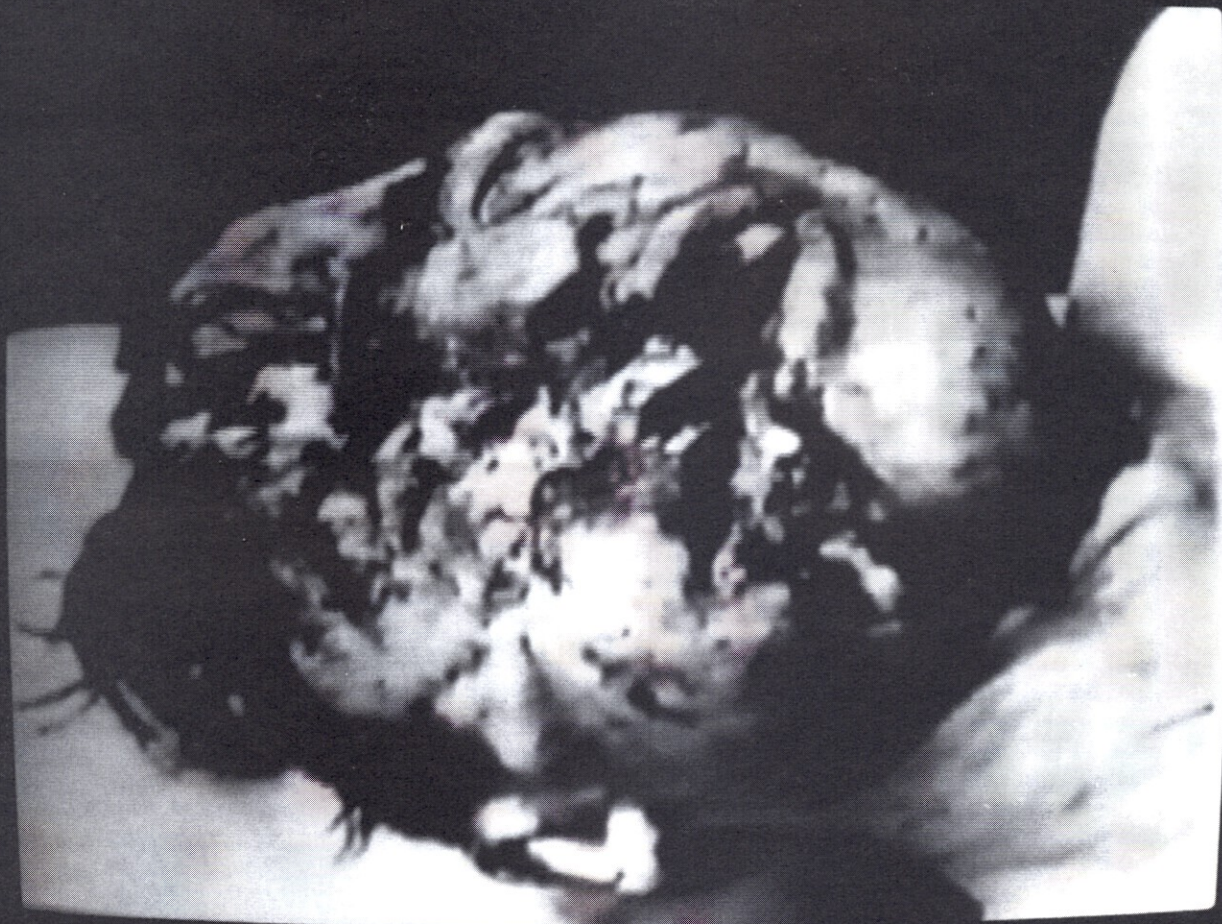18 Discussed by Krasniewicz, p.32.
19 Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, (London: Routledge 1993), p. 71.
20 Krasniewicz, p. 42.
21 Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" (1919), *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1986), p. 275.
22 Clover, p. 110.
23 Greig, p. 190.

point to try and distinguish between them, and if the represented is often so much more powerful than the real, then why is it that this particular area of 'reality'—the footage of real, on-screen death—should somehow retain its power to shock in an arena so full of vivid and challenging competitors?

The answer is twofold. Firstly, as André Bazin has argued, the unique photographic image lies in its ability to present the actual object itself, freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. Linda Williams has argued that this is the essence of hard core pornography - the decontextualisation and deracination of the moment of orgasm, a moment temporarily echoing the safety and security of the womb in its—albeit transitory—lack of subjectivity.[24] Perhaps it is this same drive towards the unity of oblivion that fuels the momentum of the Mondo film. If, as Georges Bataille has argued, life signifies discontinuity and separateness, and death signifies continuity and non-differentiation, then the desire for and attraction of death suggests also a desire to return to the state of the original oneness with the mother. The annihilation of the other in Mondo presents a kind of fleeting fulfillment, a return to the self as a coherent and unitary entity, always imagined, but never attained. The Mondo film is dedicated to capturing the visual evidence of the mechanical truth of bodily disintegration caught in involuntary spasm, the ultimate and uncontrollable confession of bodily collapse at the moment of death—a possibility earlier imagined by André Bazin in *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*. Since desire cannot exist without lack, the only possible end of desire would be the annihilation of the Other: that is, the graphic hard-core portrayal of on-screen death (which, by removing the Other, still leaves the viewing subject with nothing to define himself[25] against). In this sense, the Mondo film gives rise to both a yearning for and a terror of self-disintegration, signifying the obliteration of the self of the protagonist in the film and the spectator in the cinema, a fact which has important consequences for the positioning of the Mondo film's audience.

Secondly, the Mondo film is more shocking and arresting than the slasher because, whilst possessing many of the qualities of the horror genre, it either allows fictive storyline to merge with truth, or else ignores cohesion of film footage completely, thereby dissolving genre barriers altogether. As in the Grand Guignol, subtly, psychology, characterisation, sustained narrativity and so on are all sacrificed to the shock effect and the prevailing images of bodily disintegration. Like the fragmented bodies it depicts, therefore, the Mondo film is *itself*—to use Kristeva's term —abject, a casualty of the norms of ontological propriety, decategorised, falling loosely somewhere between the genres of slasher and documentary, between entertainment and edification, between moralising diatribe and testament of sexual perversion. At odds in the cultural scheme of things, the Mondo film is so much more disturbing than the slasher because it is itself interstitial and contradictory, refusing to fit into any existing cultural category.

Bakhtin and the Philosophy of the Body

Clearly, critics like Carroll and Kristeva are writing in a long tradition of attempts to understand the philosophy of the body, from Freud and Nietzsche to Bataille and Bachelard. To understand fully the possibilities of the Mondo film, I believe we must turn to Bakhtin's progressive reading of that state of mind and body known as *carnival*. It may seem rather perverse and contradictory to analyse such ambivalent texts in the light of a theory as apparently positive as the Bakhtinian carnivalesque. I would argue, however, not only that the Mondo film is far more progressive than it first seems, but also that the Bakhtinian carnivalesque readily embraces pain, suffering, negativity and horror without necessarily transforming them into positive, life-affirming experiences. All too often, Bakhtin's reading of the carnival is misunderstood or 'secularised' as an optimistic celebration of social and linguistic diversity, a mere festival of difference: many critics have drawn attention to Bakhtin's romantic populism. Whilst it is certainly true that Bakhtin tends to downplay the more macho-aggressive elements of the carnival and overstate its anti-patrician optimism, he was highly conscious of the darker elements of the carnival, and moreover was entirely prepared for his theories to be applied to other genres, fields and moods in times and places yet unknown to him.[26]

Etymologists have argued at length about the origins of the word *carnival*. Some claim a derivation from the phrase *carne levare*, 'the solace of the flesh'; others claim a relation with *carne vale*, 'a farewell to flesh'; yet others claim origins in the expression *carne aval*, 'down with flesh!' It has been agreed virtually beyond doubt, however, that the word originally derives from the phrase *carnem levare*, 'the putting away or removal of flesh' (as food) in the season immediately preceding Lent, on the eve of Ash Wednesday. In the Mondo film, this definition of carnival takes on a slight twist: Mondo is compelled to reveal 'the removal of flesh,' but only in order to break the collective taboo against its violation and show us the secret insides that lie beneath.

Violent Death as a Leisure Pursuit

There are, of course, a number of moral issues at stake here. Its voyeuristic carnivalisation of violent and tragic deaths has driven the Mondo film underground, to be anathematised by popular and 'art' film critics alike. The presentation of violent deaths for public

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[24] Williams, pp. 100-101.

[25] I am using the male pronoun deliberately, since the vast majority of the audience for both slasher and (especially) Mondo films is comprised of adolescent males.

[26] "The unity of the emerging (developing) idea. Hence a certain *internal* open-endedness... Sometimes it is difficult to separate one open-endedness from another," Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "From Notes Made in 1970-71" in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, translated by Vern W. McGee, Carol Emerson and Michael Holquist, eds. (Austin: U of Texas Press 1986), p. 155.

amusement is nothing new, as any glance at the history of punishment will reveal, from Roman games and 'satyr plays' to crucifixion, torture and public executions. However, recent developments in the televisual media, by allowing us a permanent public testament of all kinds of private tragedies, have placed the issue in an entirely different arena. Video recording and personal VCR players allow the viewer to experience death in private, again and again, at different speeds, and from a variety of angles, exactly as it happened in reality. Mondo is the most stigmatised of genres because it essentially makes the violent death of the human body into a leisure pursuit. To understand Mondo in terms of Bakhtinian carnivalesque is not to gloss over such moral issues; indeed, the core of the Bakhtinian method is the impossibility of separating the aesthetic from the moral and political, evident in Bakhtin's own refusal to ignore moral and ideological components.

Films like *Death Scenes* and *The Killing of America* are quite clearly made not for public cinema release, but for viewing in the privacy of one's own home. Like many other leisuretime activities such as computer games and television, home video can be understood as a carnivalised site in that engagement in the activity demands a special, sacred time in the flow of secular (working) time and a temporary suspension in the flow of secular time. The television itself is also a kind of sacred space within secular space—and, moreover, like may other forms of leisuretime activity, home video is *regulated* festivity. There is something quite ironic about the fact that Bakhtinian carnivalesque involves rigid regularities, discrete groups, graduated hierarchies and so on, which brings up the question of just how *carnivalesque* this kind of structured, rigorous, hierarchical festivity really is. It could be argued that the horror video in particular is really only a parodic catharsis, which links up with the idea of carnival as a *safety-valve*, with an essentially *conservative* function socially. It would be unwise to forget that the potential of carnival for radical rebellion is in the end politically limited, since it is, after all, licensed misrule - a contained and officially sanctioned rebellion, after which everybody gets back to work.

Where Mondo goes beyond the potentialities of the traditional horror film is in its single, all-encompassing, non-narrative presentation of a carnivalesque series of bodily deformities and perversions. In the liminal period of carnival, participants are allowed to display all those things—such as the inside of the human body—that can destroy society and that all the rest of the time must be kept under control if society is to continue. All the rules that usually govern social life are suspended. Taboos can be broken without serious long-range sanctions as long as they are broken within the carefully defined limits of the carnival.

In his study of Rabelais, Bakhtin argues that the crux of the carnival is its attitude towards the human body, and the life of the body. In Rabelaisian carnival, the anatomical structure of the human body is revealed in action, and becomes a character in its own right. "But it is not the individual body, trapped in an irreversible life sequence, that becomes a character," notes Bakhtin, "rather it is the impersonal body, the body of the human race as a whole, being born, living, dying the most varied deaths...."[27] The grotesque carnival body is a body in the act of becoming, which is never finished or completed but continually breaking, building and changing. Carnival ignores the impenetrable surface that closes the limits of the body as a separate and completed phenomenon, displaying "not only the outward but also the inner features of the body: blood, bowels, heart and other organs. The outward and inward features are often merged into one."[28]

Mediaeval carnival frequently featured lengthy catalogues of bodily parts and pieces, extensive anatomisations of the different layers and levels of bodily life. Bakhtin draws our attention to an episode in Rabelais where human bodies are transformed into 'minced meat,' containing a long and detailed anatomic list of wounded members and organs, broken bones and joints,[29] the very image of a "bodily harvest."[30] Indeed, the theme of the original *carne levare* was the theme of the feast, involving images of the slaughter of cattle, disembowelling, dismemberment and the devouring of the dismembered body—images which are later transferred to the anatomic description of the generating womb. Original carnival images would have been far less shocking than their equivalent modern representations in the Mondo genre, however, because the eyes and imagination of mediaeval man were more accustomed to the grotesque body. Bakhtin points out that "in literature and pictorial art, the body of mixed parts and the strangest anatomical features, the free play with the human limbs were unfolded before [mediaeval man]. The transgression of the limits dividing the body from the world also became customary."[31]

At other times the carnival displays a number of typical grotesque forms of exaggerated bodily parts that completely hide the normal members of the body, thereby providing visions of either dismemberment, or of bodies distorted and enlarged to gigantic dimensions. Carnival, like Mardi Gras, presents us with images of characters with monstrous bellies, humps, huge noses, abnormally long legs or gigantic ears.[32] In a similar way, Mondo films catalogue bodies that are swollen and distorted by death, with bloated features, discoloured skin and dismembered torsos. *Death Scenes* includes images of drowned bodies dragged from the water, bodies enlarged by carbon monoxide poisoning, and bodies scarred and inflamed by knife and gunshot wounds. In such carnivalesque scenarios, the human cadaver is wrenched and misformed into a grotesque travesty of its non-carnival shape.

Regeneration Through Violence

The aim of carnivalesque discourse, according to Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, is to bring the world closer in order for us to examine it fearlessly: "to feed on dense experience: to be with the smell of real

human bodies":[33] mediaeval carnival was the drama of bodily life (copulation, birth, growth, eating, drinking, defecation). During the carnival, death is put in its 'own place' in the real world and thereby established as an unavoidable aspect of life itself. This is exactly the case in Mondo. In its temporary flaunting of taboos, the Mondo film can demonstrate the physiological inevitability of death in grotesque anatomical detail, in all its clarity and precision, as part of an impersonal understanding of the living and struggling human body. In Rabelaisian carnivalesque, "death does not interfere with life; rather, it appears as merely one aspect of this life, and is made out of the same stuff as life itself."[34] The carnival's obsession with death is possibly related to general folkloric assumptions concerning the regenerative power of death and of the fresh corpse, and the idea of healing the death of one by the death of another: death in folklore and oral literature has always been related to the birth of new life, fertility and growth. Other thinkers such as Freud and Otto Rank have charted the connections between the fear associated with the thought of death, and the terror of birth. Rank suggests that the most ancient forms of burial, the shape of the coffin, the rituals connected with burial and so on all reveal an unconscious conception of death as the return to the mother's womb, since—as Rank sees it—the final spasms of the death agony exactly repeat the first spasms of the organism in the act of being born.[35] Carnival draws our attention to death as a moment which is entirely drawn into the cycle of life. During the mediaeval carnival, "death and death-throes, labour and childbirth are intimately interwoven,"[36] and thereby the deeply ambivalent nature of the wish for death is disclosed.

LaVey claims in his self-written narrative soundtrack to *Death Scenes* that our fascination with such vivid and graphic images of violent bodily collapse lies in our unconscious understanding of how such representations can remind us of the universal inevitability of death, and thereby encourage us to live our lives to the full, to confront "life with honour, death with dignity." This is either simplifying the case or overstating it; but there is a case to be made that the *frisson* of horror evoked by a road accident or a local murder is a feeling that is, essentially, both life-affirming and existential. The popularity of the Mondo film - like the popularity of the Roman games and public execution - must lie, to some extent, in the archetypal, folkloric connections between violent death and physical regeneration.

Bodily and Other Inversions

The Mondo film may perhaps most clearly be understood as a site of Bakhtinian carnival in its appropriation of a series of inversions. According to Bakhtin, carnival is a time of ritual reversal, an institutionalised time of upheaval when the world is turned upside down, ordinary people become horrifying monsters or animals and the dead are resurrected: the element of relativity and *becoming* is emphasized, in opposition to the immoveable and extratemporal stability of the mediaeval hierarchy. A prin-

ciple function of mediaeval carnival is to emphasis the importance of inside-out and upside-down in the movements and acts of the body. Bakhtin refers to carnival as a gay parody of truth in a world which is "turned inside out,"[37] and describes the representations of these inversions, in typically evocative locutions, as images of "tripe life" and "tripe death," where portrayals of death, birth, excrement and food "are all drawn together and tied in one grotesque knot; this is the center of bodily topography in which the upper and lower stratum penetrate each other."[38] In a similar way, carnival curses depict a body which is turned inside out, causing the anus to protrude: "curses always indicate a downward motion, directed to the ground, the legs, the buttocks."[39] Carnival curses and oaths are typically based on grotesque images of the human body anatomized and dismembered. In representations of "tripe life" and "tripe death," notes Bakhtin, "the limits between animal flesh and the consuming human flesh are dimmed, very nearly erased"[40]:

> We always find in [mediaeval comic images] the defeat of fear presented in a droll and monstrous form, the symbols of power and violence turned inside out, the comic images of death and bodies gaily rent asunder. All that was terrifying becomes grotesque.[41]

In the carnival of underground cinema, Mondo is a genre of upheaval and reversal not only in its inversion of the traditional realist film narrative, but in the way its entire structure is based on a series of anatomical inversions that carnivalise the site of the body. The impetus of the Mondo film is sustained by a repetition-compulsion to exhibit the inverted body, the body reversed, opened up, upside down, inside out. This series of anatomical images is essentially an obsessive reiteration of the human body *out of control*, and thereby—as in comedy—made ridiculous.

Horror and Laughter

Bakhtin points out that one of the most significant features of the carnival is the way in which, at carnival, death becomes comic, as in the Rabelaisian mocking of death. Rabelaisian carnival presents a number of examples

[27] Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination*, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: U of Texas Press 1981).
[28] Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. by Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge: MIT Press 1968),p. 318
[29] Bakhtin, *Rabelais* , p. 194.
[30] *Ibid.*, p. 208
[31] *Ibid.*, p. 347
[32] *Ibid.*,p. 328
[33] Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics," translated by Caryl Emerson, *History and Theory of Literature 8* (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota Press 1984), p. 47.
[34] Bakhtin, Forms, p. 195.
[35] As noted by V.N. Volosinov (M.M. Bakhtin), *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*, translated by I.R. Titunik, Neal Bruss, ed. (New York: Academic Press Inc., 1976),p. 63.
[36] Bakhtin, *Rabelais* , p. 151.
[37] *Ibid.*, p. 95.
[38] *Ibid.*, p. 163.
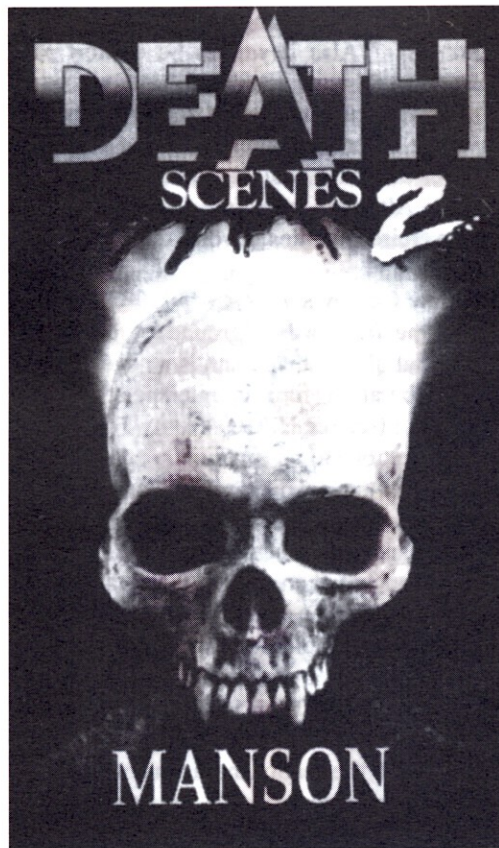[39] *Ibid.*, p. 166.
[40] *Ibid.*,p. 221.
[41] *Ibid.*,p. 91.

of the grotesque or *clownish* portrayal of death, and the image of death itself takes on humorous aspects: "death is inseparable from *laughter*"[42] and so we arrive at the representation of "*cheerful deaths.*"[43] Films like *Death Scenes* and *The Killing of America* help us to understand how certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to the reflex of laughter. Folkloric laughter liberates the consciousness from the confines of its own discourse, and hence creates freedom. "Seriousness burdens us with hopeless situations, but laughter lifts us above them and liberates us from them. Laughter does not encumber man, it liberates him."[44]

Much of LaVey's narrative voiceover in *Death Scenes* takes on a wryly comic vein. Without ever being openly vulgar or distasteful, his gently ironic account of each corpse's demise succeeds in cynically mocking the dignity of the human body, and all the taboos and rituals with which we surround its collapse and demise. LaVey remarks on the "inventive approaches" of "over-ambitious" suicides for whom "commonplace firearms did not suffice"; points out "a sterling example of matricide," a "remarkably brutal bludgeoning," and notes how one woman's head has been "cleaved neatly in two." He describes the suicide of a legal client who slayed his incompetent attorney as "moving for a dismissal of his own design"; "objection sustained," he comments on a similar scenario, "as yet another disgruntled client vents his wrath on two attorneys whom he felt mishandled his defence." The assailant who murdered a Japanese man for 30 cents and his watch is described by LaVey as currently "killing time" in San Quentin; a woman is bludgeoned and dumped outside a laundry by her lover because "she declared their romance was all washed up," and the bloody tableau of a man murdered by the owner of a corner food stand over payment of a 10 cent hot dog is referred to as LaVey as "a sight few would relish."

Clearly, *Death Scenes* involves a deliberate and parodic kind of bad taste which helps the audience deal with the horrors of death, possibly relating to fantasies of immortality, and so on. Bakhtin emphasises the *libidinal* nature of laughter and its associations with tension, with bad taste, and with the mocking of death. During the carnival, there is a close and intrinsic connection between ritualistic violations, ritualistic laughter, rit-

ualistic parody and clownishness; comedy, tied to the gross realities of life, takes its place in permanent conjunction with death.[45] For example, Bakhtin draws our attention to the comic presentation at the carnival of mimicked death throes ("hanging tongue, expressionless popping eyes, suffocation, death rattle... spasms, tensions... sweat, convulsions of arms and legs"[46]). The abjection attached to similar representations of the 'opened body' and absence of bodily order in the Mondo film signal the many connections between the horrific and the comic in the way both manifest the return of the repressed in the guise of bodily miscontrol. Bakhtin is one of the few philosophers to draw explicit attention to the inter-related nature of horror and laughter.

Uncrowning Rituals

The main function of laughter during the carnival seems to be to *uncrown* or *contemporize*. Films like *Death Scenes* and *The Killing of America*, in their deliberate mocking of the human body and its undignified collapse, involve what Bakhtin would describe as a "necessary" uncrowning, a removal of the venerated object (the dead body) from a distanced plane, and an assault on or destruction of the distanced plane in general. This uncrowning is essentially linked to blows and abuses which are universal, and never assume the character of merely personal invective. By allowing death to seem ridiculous and therefore less 'venerated,' the Mondo film can access the very nature of what it means to be human. Underground cinema has become a kind of carnivalesque folk theatre for the cultural expression of violence and misrule, which serves the purpose of symbolic as well as performative disorder. This disorder seems to be instinctual in nature, containing a level of aggression and violence which seems to bespeak the libidinal associations between the horrific and the ridiculous, between laughter and bloodshed.

The King of uncrowning and disorder is the mystery carnival devil, or the Lord of Misrule, whose function, according to Bakhtin, is to stand as an ambivalent image, like the fool and the clown, representing the destroying and renewing force of the material bodily lower stratum. Like Anton LaVey of the Church of Satan, the mystery devil is an ex-official figure whose ambivalence and whose

material bodily form make us clearly understand his transformation into a popular comic figure who ties together both horror and laughter. The psychotic carnival music backing LaVey's narration in *Death Scenes* epitomises his status as a folk devil, abusing and mocking the dead. At other times in the same film, the role of the Lord of Misrule is played by the dead bodies themselves, which in the gross physical transformations of violent death come to oddly resemble the carnival clown or the Harlequin who "sweats and gapes... His face is swollen, his eyes pop... The gaping mouth, the protruding eyes, sweat, trembling, suffocation, the swollen face - all these are typical symptoms of the grotesque life of the body."[47] It is significant that the part of the body that is represented most vividly in *Death Scenes*, as in the *Faces of Death* series, is the face and head; the Mondo film is replete with images of faces torn open, heads blown up, mouths, ears and noses draining blood. One image in *Death Scenes* shows us a man who has shot himself in the head with a revolver and whose separated brain has left his body and sits on the floor, right at the forefront of the picture. "Curiously," remarks LaVey, "the brain which had made the frantic decision to kill only a few moments before now lies peacefully in plain view on the planks of an old wooden porch." Another image of a car accident victim presents us with a truncated torso whose decapitated head lies some yards away, face upwards, in the middle of the road. "Of all the car crashes on view in our source," comments LaVey, "this one is undoubtedly the most novel. This decapitated head landed neatly in the centre of the road with a serene facial expression which totally belies the obvious fury of the crash." Other images present grotesque visions of facial collapse, like so many broken masks. These are highly carnivalesque representations: in the carnival body there is no opaque surface, only cavities and heights. According to Bakhtin:

> Of all the features of the human face, the nose and mouth play the most important part in the grotesque image of the body; the head, ears and nose also acquire a grotesque character when they adopt the animal form or that of inanimate objects... But the most important of all human features for the grotesque is the mouth. It dominates all else. The grotesque face is actually reduced to the gaping mouth; the other features are only a frame encasing this wide-open bodily abyss.[48]

The *disrespect* for death which is intrinsic in all these images of the contemporising and uncrowning of the human cadaver derives from the carnivalesque ridiculing of relics, which was common in mediaeval literature - especially Protestant satire—where the dismembered bodies of saints became an occasion for grotesque images and enumerations of various parts of the dismembered bodies.[49] In the carnival that is underground cinema, the role of the holy relic is played by the dignified living human body, which is aped and travestied by an obsessive litany of bodily collapse.

Underground Cinema as Nervous Disorder

Many of the critics writing on the slasher movie (Clover, Dika, Prince) believe they have stumbled across a critically neglected and yet fundamentally radical genre, whose dismissal as trivial or lacking in value allows it to exert considerably progressive influence in such areas as schemata of identification, gender representation, and mechanisms of subjectivity. No longer, however, is the slasher movie a critically neglected genre: recent years have presented an increasing number of articles on many slasher films, both mainstream and (at one time) obscure. This recent interest in the 'repressed' and 'taboo' slasher is however merely a scapegoat for film critics and cultural theorists to avoid dealing with the *real* taboos. Fascination with the slasher conveniently diverts interest from the film nobody wants to talk about—the 'Other' film, the repressed of the slasher movie: the Mondo film.

When considering the subliminal associations between film and dream, it is important to remember that Freud came to dream interpretation out of concern with psychiatric needs and in the effort to utilise dreams as symptoms. If the Mondo genre can be seen as the 'Other' film, and if—as I have been suggesting—the 'Other' film is the repressed of the mainstream horror feature, then it can be concluded that the images presented in the Mondo film are catalogues of nervous disorders and psychotic symptoms: the repressed complexes of traditional horror film narrative. The final and the most shocking of the Mondo film's catalogue of grotesque inversions is its inversion of the liminal and the subliminal by transferring elements of unconscious nervous disease into the conscious filmic narrative. The Mondo film is an externalised diagnosis of the many sicknesses successfully repressed by traditional horror film.[50] In its terrifying carnivalisation of the site of the body, the spasm of death, and of that moment where horror merges with laughter, the Mondo film—for those able to appreciate its progressive nature—fulfills all the functions of the traditional horror narrative, but more graphically, more horrifically, and more radically.

[42] Bakhtin, "Forms," p. 196.
[43] *Ibid.*
[44] Bakhtin, "Notes," p. 44.
[45] Bakhtin, "Forms," p. 194
[46] Bakhtin, *Rabelais* ,pp. 353-4
[47] *Ibid.*, pp.304 and 308
[48] *Ibid.*, pp. 316-17
[49] *Ibid* .,p. 350
[50] V.N. Volosinov (M.M. Bakhtin), *Freudianism*, p. 50.

Serial Killers,
True Crime, and Economic Performance Anxiety

by Annalee Newitz

"Torture. Dismemberment. Rape. Cannibalism. Incest. Murder. His crimes make Ted Bundy and Charles Manson sound like choirboys! ...Complete with never before published photos including artwork by Lucas himself!"

— from the blurb on serial killer Henry Lee Lucas' biography (called *Henry Lee Lucas*), by Joel Norris

For Americans, serial killers like Henry Lee Lucas and Ted Bundy are media celebrities. This is so widely known, and so generally condemned, that pop-core auteur Oliver Stone recently made an entire movie, *Natural Born Killers* (1994), based on the critique of serial killer celebrity. Like Norman Mailer's 1979 'true life novel' *The Executioner's Song*, *Natural Born Killers* focuses —often ironically—on the promotion and popularization of charismatic young Americans who murder people and commit other violent crimes. For Mailer and Stone, the murderers themselves are less problematic than the media industry which makes them famous; Stone ends his film with Mickey (one of the killers) telling a tabloid TV reporter that he's the morally bereft 'Frankenstein' who made Mickey possible in the first place. Mickey and his wife Mallory then shoot the reporter, filming it all on a portable TV camera.

In movies like *Natural Born Killers*, Americans can look critically at their pleasure in murder as much as they celebrate murder itself. One might make a similar observation about the ongoing American obsession with OJ Simpson's murder trial. Although the trial consistently makes front page news, op-ed pieces—and even feature stories—blasting Americans for 'sinking to a new low' in their love of exploitation and sensationalism are just as popular. One might say that there's often something like social criticism going on when Americans consume stories about murder. This social criticism even seems to have a specific historical context: serial killers and stories about them are associated with the period beginning roughly near the end of the 1950s.[1] What might the culture and society of post-50s America have to do with the eruption of a new kind of homicidal pathology? And what exactly is it about serial killer narratives which makes them so seductive, particularly when that seductiveness is so easily and quickly criticized? What I want to suggest is that the serial killer—as both allegory and 'reality'—acts out the enraged confusion with which Americans have come to regard their Post-War economic and social productivity.

True Crime

Hitchcock's film *Psycho* (1960) is often cited as the original serial killer narrative which spawned an entire genre of serial killer or 'slasher' stories popular throughout the 1970s, 80s and early 90s.[2] However, the film *Psycho* is itself based upon an 'original' narrative, the life story of Ed Gein,[3] who in 1957 was discovered to have killed and ritualistically mutilated two elderly women who reminded him of his dead mother. Gein, like *Psycho*'s Norman Bates, was a seemingly ordinary and shy man who lived an isolated life in a rural American town. While Hitchcock's shocking ending to *Psycho* introduced Americans to transvestitism, Gein had already done Hitchcock one better in the shock department: rather than dressing up in his mother's clothing, he used to dress up in her (cured and preserved) skin. But decades later, American audiences finally got treated

to a dose of Gein's 'true' crimes in a film about serial killers called *Silence of the Lambs* which won Best Picture, Best Actor (Anthony Hopkins), Best Actress (Jodie Foster), and Best Director (Jonathan Demme) at the 1991 Academy Awards. In homage to both *Psycho* and Gein's life story, Demme had directed a film about a serial killer who wears the female skins of his victims. And it was at this moment—when the cinematic serial killer's crimes were at their most shocking and 'true'— that he achieved the status of allegorical figure in what powerful cultural institutions like the Motion Picture Academy name 'art.'

Because fictional representations of serial killers are often based on the biographies of actual killers, one might say the serial killer narrative spans both fictional and non-fictional genres. Biographical portraits of famous serial killers are available to consumers of the popular genre known as 'true crime.' Interestingly enough, true crime sections in bookstores are frequently located within or next to sociology sections.[4] True crime seems to consider itself the non-fictional generic counterpart—and the theory of—fictional narratives about crime and criminality. Criminological and true crime accounts of serial killers agree on serial killer demographics, and on their personality types. Joel Norris, a 'psychobiologist' and author of many true crime accounts of serial murder, writes in his trade paperback *Serial Killers* that most serial killers are white men under forty.[5] His point is reiterated in a scholarly textbook on the topic, Eric W. Hickey's *Serial Murderers and Their Victims*. Hickey notes that "in this study, males were responsible for 88% of all serial murder cases...male offenders tended to be in their late 20s...85% of male offenders were white."[6] A great deal of overlap exists between pop true crime, and what might be called authentic criminology. Indeed, Hickey introduces his book by acknowledging the contributions true crime authors like Ann Rule (a former police officer, now a best-selling true crime author) have made in his field.

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[1] See Eric W. Hickey, *Serial Murderers and Their Victims* (Pacific Grove: Brooks and Cole, 1991), pp. 74-77. He notes that the past 25 years have seen a dramatic increase in serial killing, especially during the 1970s.

[2] See, for example, Andrew Tudor's discussion of the popularity of 'psycho' movies after 1960 in *Monsters and Mad Scientists*, (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 185-209.

[3] More accurately, Hitchcock based *Psycho* on a novel by Robert Bloch which was inspired by Ed Gein's life story. For an account of Gein's crimes, see Harold Schechter, *Deviant* (New York: Pocket Books, 1989).

[4] I found this to be the case in both a local Berkeley bookstore, Cody's Books, and in the corporate bookstore chain Barnes and Noble. In fact, Cody's had placed true crime on a few shelves in between a section called sociology and a section called Marxism and labor. I suspect—based purely on anecdotal evidence—that this is a peculiarly American configuration. Once, shopping for true crime in Cody's, I began chatting with another patron who was visiting from Scotland. She was stocking up on true crime books because, as she said, American bookstores had the best selections she had ever seen.

[5] Joel Norris, *Serial Killers* (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), pp. 47-58.

[6] Hickey, op. cit., p. 133.

True crime authors and criminologists postulate that serial killers' psychopathology allows them to function 'normally' in most situations; many are able to hide their periodic moments of homicidal psychosis. Most are 'drifters' who commit similar crimes in a number of regions over a period of time. The most noteworthy and characteristic aspect of serial killing is the relative randomness of its victims. Serial killers are rarely acquainted with the people they kill, and for this reason serial killings are sometimes called 'stranger murders.'[7] Serial killers are also known as 'recreational killers' or 'lust killers,'[8] indicating the degree to which their acts are associated with the pursuit of leisure and sexual desire. Often in true crime books we find a kind of self-reflexive cultural analysis of American masculine identity gone awry.

Masculinity, as Lynne Segal has observed, is an identity constituted by a reaction against what is perceived to be 'feminine' or 'other' in all human beings. That is, for a man to identify himself as 'masculine,' there must exist a series of identities which he refuses to claim as his own. He projects these identities onto subordinated 'others,' which in an American context are most often women, children, and ethnic or sexual minority groups. The 'other' is then generally associated with vulnerability, passivity, domesticity, and emotionality, while the man is 'free' of them. "No one can be [masculine] without constantly doing violence to many of the most basic human attributes," Segal writes.[9] To maintain his identity, in other words, he must do a kind of psychic violence to himself; he excises and disavows a portion of his feelings and social experiences. One can see where a purely feminist analysis of serial killing might go, and perhaps rightly: the serial killer, in this analysis, kills off the 'feminine vulnerability' in himself when he kills women, and thus proves himself a man. While this reading is a good start, both true crime literature and its subjects are more complex than that—men sometimes kill other men, and women do too. While clearly there is a deep connection between cultural constructions of masculinity and serial murder—as true crime authors almost unanimously acknowledge—it may not be enough to understand this simply in terms of the violence of gendered hierarchies.

As Mark Seltzer points out in his discussion of serialized violence, masculinity is also associated with dominant modes of economic production and reproduction.[10] Seltzer draws a connection between repetitive male violence and 'machine culture,' which he links to industrialized mass production and information-processing bureaucracies. In other words, he offers us a way of understanding masculine violence in terms of the kind of work men do in a bureaucratic capitalist culture. This work is repetitive, blurs the boundaries between what is natural and artificial, and takes place in a consumer-oriented economy. Seltzer's analysis suggests a way of understanding serialized violence as a kind of social corollary to working conditions under consumer capitalism. Indeed, the American 'ideal' of masculinity is based as much upon what it means to be eco-

nomically productive as it is upon a repudiation of femininity. The man who makes a great deal of money is seen as more potent, more masculine, than the man who (for example) teaches writing and composition for a living.

Keeping this in mind, I want to take a look at what Ted Bundy referred to in a series of interviews as his "professional job"[11]—kidnapping, raping and murdering women. Bundy's effort to achieve 'normal' masculinity was profoundly dependent upon his sense of himself as a successful worker. Ann Rule—his former colleague and true crime biographer—reports that during the time he was murdering women in Colorado, Utah and Seattle, Bundy was pursuing—rather successfully—a career in law and politics. He volunteered with the Republican Party, served on various local committees for the prevention of violent crimes, and matriculated as a law student at the University of Utah. With a bachelor's degree in psychology, he also did a good deal of social work such as volunteering with Rule at a suicide-prevention hotline in Seattle. His background, as Rule puts it, was "stultifyingly middle-class,"[12] and Bundy was ambitiously pursuing both economic and social upward mobility.

In her biography of Bundy, *The Stranger Beside Me*, Rule is explicit about the relationship between Bundy's crimes and his desire to be upper class. His victims resembled each other quite closely—all were conventionally beautiful and 'feminine;' all had long hair parted in the middle; and all of them tended to be middle- to upper-middle-class. His final killing spree in Tallahassee, Florida took place in a 'top' sorority house, a virtual factory for the production of middle-class women. Moreover, Rule and other commentators on Bundy's crimes have noted that Bundy began killing women shortly after being rejected by Stephanie Brooks, a wealthy woman he dated for a year in college who wore her long dark hair parted in the middle. Rule believes that Bundy felt Brooks "outclassed him,"[13] and his subsequent murders of women who resembled her would seem to indicate that his victims were chosen not just for their gendered characteristics, but for their apparent class backgrounds as well. One might say that Bundy, rather than 'marrying up,' killed 'up' instead.

Ultimately, Bundy's crimes got him the best job of his career as a fledgling lawyer: his own case. When on trial in Colorado and Florida, Bundy acted as his own defense attorney, and spent vast amounts of time and energy in law libraries working on his own defense. His state-appointed lawyers served as 'counsel' for the most part, and Bundy became famous for discrediting his attorneys, asking that the state reassign him different ones, and generally making a nuisance of himself in court and out with his requests for special treatment and delays. At one point during his Florida trial, he was witness, defendant and defense attorney all at once. Of course, Bundy wasn't the only one making a career out of his murders. Rule herself, a single mother of four trying to make ends meet on a police officer's salary and the money she got writing articles for true crime magazines, got her first big break when

she realized that she was actually acquainted with Ted Bundy from their work at the suicide prevention hotline. Because she knew him, Rule was able to scoop the story and get exclusive interviews with the recently apprehended killer. One of the most fascinating aspects of *The Stranger Beside Me* is Rule's personal story of her growing fame and success as she writes the book. Her concerns about money, writing, and raising her family are interwoven with Bundy's life story, which often echoes—perversely—her own. Both Bundy and Rule desired professional success, and both used true crime to get it.

Homo Economicus

Economic identity, especially after World War II, is associated with the ability to produce effectively, but more notably with the ability to consume. Juliet Schor describes what economists of this period dub 'homo economicus,' or economic man:

> The most important personality trait of homo economicus is that he can never be satiated. He will always prefer more to less. Although he can become tired of any particular good, there is never a point at which having more goods overall will make him worse off. And because more will always make him better off, his desires are infinite.[14]

His dominant trait appears to be a desire to consume infinitely—and, as a result, he must work infinitely as well. Indeed, the premise of Schor's book *The Overworked American* is precisely that homo economicus must essentially become a workaholic in order to support his consumer habits. Serial killers, in true crime and in Hollywood, often seem trapped in what Schor calls the 'treadmill' effect of consumer capitalism, where the American Dream is dominated by a frantic desire to work hard enough to maintain it. For these serial killers, the murderous act stands in for their inability to stop working, and consuming. They kill after reaching a point where they begin to confuse living people with the inanimate objects they produce and consume as workers.

Tim Cahill names his biography of serial killer John Wayne Gacy *Buried Dreams* in ironic reference to the American Dream of prosperity and political success for which Gacy longed. Gacy had nearly achieved that success when he was caught; he had even had his picture taken with then First Lady Rosalyn Carter after he organized a large civic parade. Cahill repeatedly calls Gacy a workaholic—and Gacy's criminal acts did indeed become notorious because they appeared to proceed so directly from the kind of work—contracting—he did in his everyday life. When Gacy was finally arrested, he gave a series of voluntary statements about his crimes. He admitted to killing over 30 boys, and claimed many were buried in the crawl space under his home. Later, Gacy drew a concise map of where each of the graves was located in the crawl space—they had been laid out with the precision of a contractor, in such a way as to conserve space and utilize every foot available. Gacy had a tendency to kill his young

employees; they had often been told to dig trenches in his crawl space for 'laying pipes,' which led to reports about the way Gacy had his victims dig their own graves. This was true in some cases, apparently. Gacy, one might say, did not always make a distinction between people and commodities—he used his skills as a contractor both to produce buildings and to dispose of dead bodies in a systematic way. The dead bodies produced by his criminal acts were literally *built into* the structure of the house he had produced while working as a contractor.

Jeffrey Dahmer, another notorious serial killer, seemed to see little difference between the men he murdered and the kind of work he did as a chocolate factory worker. Dahmer's modus operandi was to kill men in his apartment, dismember them, and dissolve their body parts in a 50 gallon drum of acid he kept for that purpose. He occasionally ate parts of his victims' bodies. At work, Dahmer stirred liquid chocolate in large drums. Essentially, Dahmer was treating his victims just as he treated the commodity he produced at the chocolate factory: sometimes he stirred them into large drums of liquid, and sometimes he ate them.[15] But Dahmer, as his biographer Don Davis explains, was an utter failure as a worker—although his family was very middle-class, Dahmer himself was downwardly mobile. He went from the army to factory jobs in Milwaukee. Interestingly, Davis draws a parallel between the economic depression in Dahmer's birthplace of Akron, Ohio to Dahmer's own anti-sociality and emotional depression. He writes, "In the same way that Akron cannot keep its young [workers], Jeffrey Dahmer had a hard time keeping friends."[16] Just as we find a correspondence between Gacy's overwork and murder, we also find one between Dahmer's underemployment and murder. Ultimately, what matters here is that true crime biographers frequently link serial murder to economic conditions no matter what those conditions might be.

7 Robert Ressler and Tom Shachtman, *Whoever Fights Monsters* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), p. 153.

8 Norris, *Serial Killers*, p. 15.

9 Lynne Segal, *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men* (New Jersey: Rutgers, 1990) p. 114.

10 Mark Seltzer, "Serial Killers (1)," *Differences* 5.1, Spring 1993.

11 In *The Stranger Beside Me* (New York: Signet, 1980), investigative reporter Ann Rule describes the way Bundy, watching the news with his neighbors after the Sigma Chi sorority killings in Florida, told them that he was sure the murders were a 'professional job' (p. 282). Bundy was eventually convicted of murdering two women at the Sigma Chi sorority, and severely beating two others. At his Florida trial, his neighbors' testimony regarding this comment about the 'professional' nature of these killings was discussed at length to indicate the extent of Bundy's 'character disorder.'

12 Rule, op. cit., p. 12.

13 *Ibid.* This is from Rule's reconstruction of Ted's early life, and is not a direct quote from Bundy himself.

14 Juliet Schor, *The Overworked American* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), p. 136.

15 For information on the Dahmer crimes, see Joel Norris, *Jeffrey Dahmer* (New York: Pinnacle, 1992), and Don Davis, *The Milwaukee Murders* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991).

16 Davis, op. cit., p. 23.

Dahmer has stated that part of what motivated his homicidal behavior was a fear of 'abandonment.' This fear of abandonment is an emotional structure associated with interpersonal relationships, but it is also a primary economic relationship between workers and commodities. In a capitalist culture, the commodity is an object which appears to abandon the workers who make it. Marx has called this process 'alienation:' workers find themselves alienated from what they produce because they do not own the means of production nor do they own the products of their labor.[17] Therefore, it would appear that the mass production of commodities is a kind of mass abandonment, for nothing that workers create while on the job belongs properly to them—they cannot keep what they make.

We can see the logic of alienation at work in the biography of Henry Lee Lucas. Lucas, a drifter famous for killing hundreds of people in the South, reported to biographer Joel Norris that his childhood abuse gave him the sense that he was essentially alienated from his own life because he had never felt he owned or loved anything. He says:

> I was worth nothing. Everything I had was destroyed. My mother, if I had a pony she'd kill it…She wouldn't allow me to love nothin'…She wanted me to do what she said and that's it. That is, make sure the wood is in, the water's in, make sure the fires are kept up…Work! That's it![18]

Here Lucas connects his sense that he was deprived of emotional sustenance to his having to perform endless work for his mother in their rural home. Lucas was experiencing a version of alienated labor, although his position as a child in his mother's home would have made his situation more psychologically traumatic. Indeed, because his mother worked at home as a prostitute, one might say that Lucas never learned to distinguish between emotional alienation and economic alienation. His mother was a commodity (she sold her body for money) and also an abusive, neglectful parent. He later murdered her. For Lucas, then, people and commodities were intertwined sources of pain and alienation.

Marx has referred to capital as 'dead labor' in order to metaphorically represent how value is produced and measured in a commodity culture. This metaphor is useful here as well, for it serves to define the performance of economic and psychological identity we find in the serial killer's repeated acts of murder. Marx writes that "Capital is dead labor…The time during which the laborer works, is the time during which the capitalist consumes the labor-power he has purchased of him. If the laborer consumes his disposable time for himself, he robs the capitalist."[19] Capital is 'dead labor' because it is the index by which the worker's value is measured and consumed by a capitalist employer over time. When a person is working, he is experiencing what might be called 'dead time' because at work, the worker belongs to his employer, the capitalist. His work time, you might say, is dead for him. Moreover, what he produces at work is also dead to him, because he does not

own it. Ultimately, the worker experiences himself as 'dead' while working, for nothing he does at work enriches his life in any way. However, he does gain his salary, which is paid to him in money—he is therefore rewarded economically for being 'dead.' His worth as a human being is measured for him in terms of how long he is willing to perform his 'dead labor' to get money. Marx continues his analysis by pointing out that the worker in capitalism is just another commodity which can be purchased and used. He is—figuratively—merely an object among objects, rather than a subject with agency and self-determination. You might say that the message capitalism sends to workers is this: the longer you stay dead, the more you'll get paid. And, as a corollary: the more death you make, the more you'll be paid as well.

One of the basic and painful contradictions a worker must face is that his source of social power is also the source of his degradation as a subject. That is, his work may give him power, but the price he pays is in many ways the 'death' of his subjectivity, or various parts of his subjectivity over time. When this contradiction becomes too much for him to bear, he may develop a psychopathology which compels him to literalize Marx's metaphoric notion of 'dead labor' by killing people who represent it. Murder is, for these men, a way of projecting onto others the destructive feelings inspired in the workplace. This logic is particularly clear in Gacy's case, as he converted his employees (dead labor) into dead people. Dahmer and Lucas, on the other hand, killed and consumed people as if they were commodities. Indeed, Lucas felt he could only possess and love people if they were dead—he reports to Norris that most of the sex he had was with the bodies of women he killed.

But as the serial killer epithet 'recreational killer' suggests, serial killing is supposed to take place outside the realm of work, like leisure or family time. Henri Lefebvre has theorized that as bourgeois society developed, work became more rigidly delineated from leisure at the same
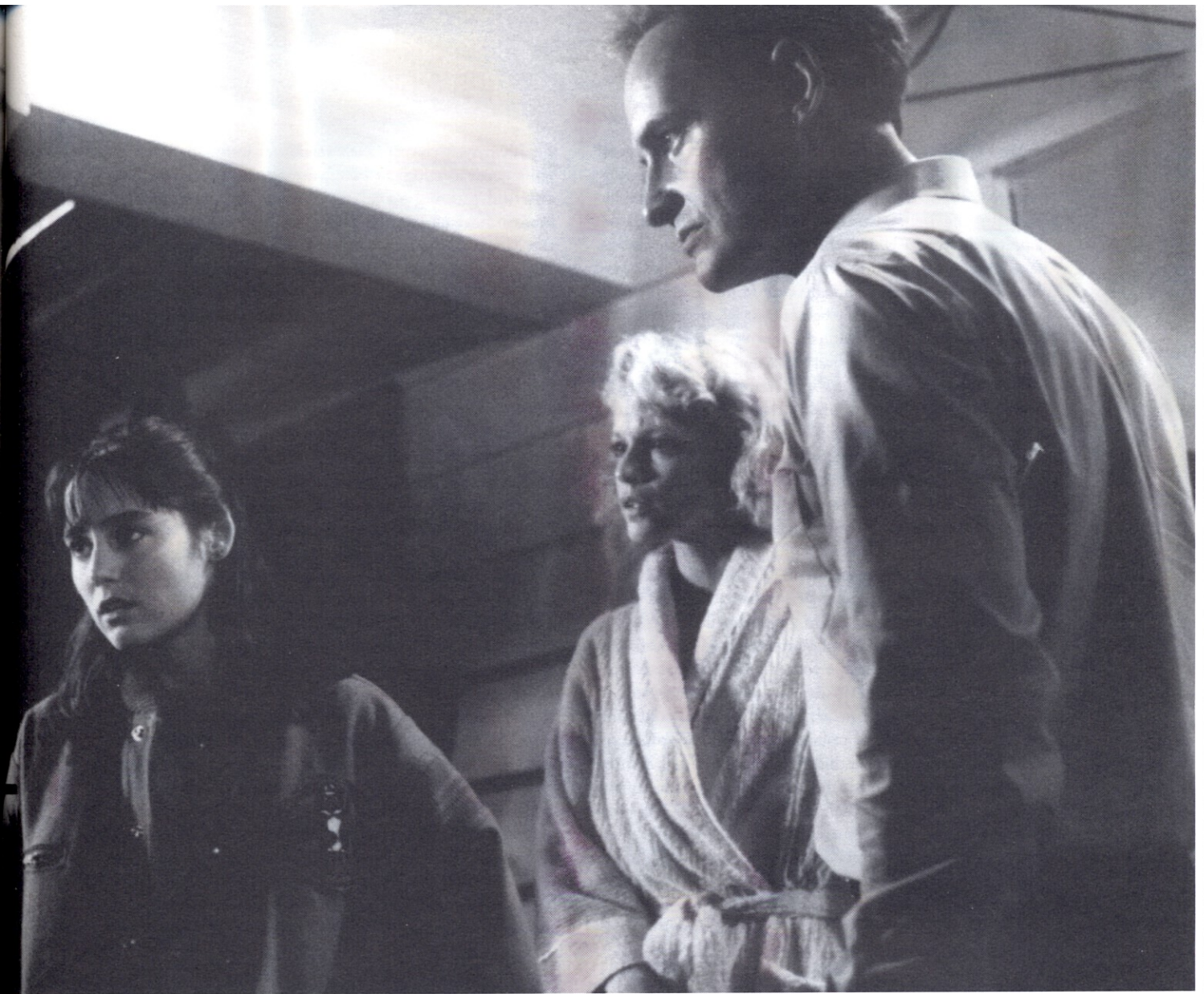
The Stepfather

time that it also became segregated from family life. Hence, Lefebvre, notes, "family life became separate from productive activity. And so did leisure."[20] If we consider serial killing a pathological form of recreation, it is logical that we might find serial killing also represented as a pathological extension of family relations. Narratives which portray fathers, mothers, and even children as serial killers are quite common. When seemingly ordinary fathers become serial killers, we find that their pathological transformation is often caused by their discovery that family life is as difficult and demanding as work.[21] Lefebvre's contention that capitalism sets up families and leisure in opposition to labor helps explain why a man who wishes to escape from work might hope to find a safe haven in his family. What seems to convert these fathers into murderers is the realization that work does not end when they come home to their wives and children.

The Stepfather (1987), a 'sleeper' horror film followed by two sequels, demonstrates the congruence between fatherhood and work, as well as one man's unsuccessful effort to escape both. The movie opens with Jerry, the serial killer, altering his appearance and identity after having brutally murdered his family. Jerry is, we discover, not just a serial killer, but a serial father. His modus operandi is to move from family to family, marrying women with children, all of whom he kills

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[17] Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (London and New York: Norton, 1972) pp. 71-74.

[18] Quoted in Joel Norris, *Henry Lee Lucas* (New York: Zebra, 1991), p. 36.

[19] Karl Marx, *Capital* (New York: New World, originally published in 1867), p. 224.

[20] Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life. Vol. I,* (New York and London: Verso, originally published in 1947), p. 31.

[21] Because I'm looking primarily at masculinity here, I'll be focusing only on serial killer fathers, rather than mothers and children. It's worth noting, however, that often women and children seem to kill because family life is too much work for them to bear as well—although in rape-revenge movies like *Ms. 45*, the motive is less clearly related to economic concerns.

once they 'disappoint' him. Jerry facilitates his movement from one family to the next by quitting his job and getting a new one somewhere else; hence, he murders the family he's leaving behind only after he is sure he will be employed afterwards. His ability to repeatedly murder his family is, in other words, contingent upon his ability to find work in a place far enough away from the scene of his crime that he will not easily be noticed.

Having gotten a job as a real estate agent, Jerry quickly ingratiates himself with a new family. Once this occurs, we see Jerry and his new family almost entirely from the point of view of his teenage stepdaughter, Stephanie. Stephanie seems to sense that Jerry is danger-ous, particularly because she sees him fly into a violent rage, throwing his carpentry tools and talking to himself, when he believes no one is watching. Jerry is equally sus-picious of Stephanie. Her problems at school force him to confront the fact that his family is not perfect, although he continues to pretend as if it is. When Stephanie is expelled for starting a fight with another student in art class, Jerry insists that "girls don't get expelled." Later, he nearly beats up Stephanie's boyfriend when he kisses her goodnight, insisting that the young man is "trying to rape her." His alternately dismissive and aggressive responses to Stephanie finally alarm her mother, who yells at him for not making an effort to talk to her first about how to raise Stephanie. It is at this point that his new family becomes too much work for Jerry. In response to his wife's desire to discuss their family, he says menacingly, "I'm taking care of it." His wife asks, "By yourself?" and Jerry nods. This response in particular is key to finding out what exactly Jerry's murders might mean in the con-text of American economic identity, which is deeply con-nected to a 'do it yourself' ethos.

At a company barbecue, Jerry says to his fellow real estate agents, "I truly believe that what I sell is the American Dream." Part of the American Dream, of course, is individualism. At work, Jerry is able to be the ultimate autonomous individual—even as he is plotting to kill his present family, the free market always provides him with an opportunity to rebuild himself, get a new identity, and find a new place to raise a family. That is, the free market is what allows Jerry to separate himself (individu-ate himself) from his family before he murders them. His comment to his wife, that he can fix their family "by him-self," tips us off to his main problem with family life. Family life is work which relies upon social interdepen-dence, rather than individualism. As much as he desires family life—he returns to it again and again—his training as an individual in the free market makes it impossible for him to perform his work in the home.

But why does the father's refusal of family life get represented with such brutal violence in serial killer narra-tives? Charles Derber, referring to the Menendez brothers, famous for having murdered their millionaire parents, concludes that their "pathology was that they allowed themselves to be socialized so completely." For Derber,

the Menendez brothers are a version of Jerry—their act of violence was a logical extension of the behavior they observed growing up in a family which valued making money above all else.[22] In other words, the problem with the Menendez family—and Jerry's fictional fathering—might be that ideals of the marketplace have fully invaded the home. Rules which are intended to regulate economic exchange serve to regulate socialization in the family. For example, the individual who must aggressively compete with other individuals 'works' within the economic sphere, but within the domestic sphere his ruthless pursuit of autonomy and promotion disrupts family work. Violence erupts in the serial killer narrative when family life tends to resist complete assimilation into economic life; a character like Jerry exhibits murderous violence when confronted with having to compromise his status as an autonomous individual. In attempting to organize the family by econom-ic principles, he is left with seemingly no choice but to destroy it entirely and move on to the next one.

Photographic Production

Describing how the name 'serial killer' was invented to categorize people who murder repeatedly for seemingly no reason, FBI veteran and ex-Army CID colonel Robert Ressler writes:

> I think what was...in my mind were the serial adven-tures we used to see on Saturday at the movies (the one I liked best was the Phantom). Each week, you'd be lured back to see another episode, because at the end of each one there was a cliff-hanger. In dramatic terms, this wasn't a satisfactory ending, because it increased, not lessened the tension. The same dissat-isfaction occurs in the minds of serial killers. The very act of killing leaves the murderer hanging, because it isn't as perfect as his fantasy.[23]

This diagnosis is familiar to any consumer of the serial killer narrative, in which we are often told (most famous-ly by a serial killer psychiatrist—Hannibal Lecter—in *Silence of the Lambs*) that the killer is acting out, or creat-ing, some kind of fantasy in his murders. What is inter-esting here is the way Ressler, who studies serial killers, is himself participating in the same type of serialized, unsatisfying, fantasy. When he came up with the name 'serial killer,' it was *he* who was thinking about adventure serials like *The Phantom*. Along these same lines, we might postulate that part of the pleasure an American audience gets out of consuming serial killer narratives is in the way serialized homicidal crimes seem so well-adapted to the mass cultural form.

As Guy Debord points out in *Society of the Spectacle*, late capitalism sells us images as often as it sells us goods. Similarly, Jean Baudrillard's *Simulations* addresses the way everyday reality in late capitalism is permeated by 'simu-lacra,' objects and events which exist only as reproductions and have no proper original version. Simulacra grow out of a culture in which mass production and the mass media have altered the way people interpret reality. People are

increasingly unable—and unwilling—to maintain a distinction between reality and what is fictional, or simulated, in mass produced images and things. A culture of simulation encourages people to understand all objects (including other people) as simultaneously fictional and real. Furthermore, simulacra always seem to come in a series of reproductions precisely because fiction in late capitalism is associated with mass production. If indeed homo economicus confuses himself with commodities, Baudrillard's discussion of commodity culture serves to explain why contemporary murder could involve a series of acts designed to make their author—and their object—into simulations. In fact, Joel Black's fascinating analysis of celebrity murderers in *The Aesthetics of Murder* suggests that the fantasy many killers are after is one of media fame—they kill precisely in order to see themselves mass produced as simulations in the newspapers and television reports about them[24].

Several films and novels about serial killers suggest a connection between image production and murderous acts. In the movie *The Eyes of Laura Mars* (1978), for example, a fashion photographer, Laura Mars, has a telepathic link to the mind of a serial killer. She views murders through his eyes and then duplicates several of the murder scenes in her highly successful photographs of models who appear to be wounding or killing each other. Famous for her provocative photography, she is indebted to a serial killer for her inspiration. In Dennis Cooper's novel *Frisk*—recently made into a film[25] shown at the 1995 San Francisco Lesbian and Gay Film Festival—we see a similar narrative in which an artist simulates murder. Dennis, the novel's point-of-view character, tells the story of his obsessive fantasies about having sexual relations with beautiful, dead men. Throughout most of the novel, the reader is unsure whether Dennis is actually killing men, or if he is merely writing a novel about doing it. Finally, we discover that his descriptions of murdering young men in Holland are actually a series of letters he's been writing and sending to his old lovers, two brothers named Julien and Kevin.

The violence of serial killers, it would seem, is associated in particular with the aesthetic production of photographs or film. In *Frisk*, we discover that Dennis traces his fascination with eroticized dead bodies back to a series of 'snuff' photographs he saw as a teenager in the back room of a magazine shop. *Frisk* begins and ends with short sections titled only with the symbol for infinity. Each is a description of the snuff photographs; in the opening section, we are unsure of whether the boy in the photographs is actually dead, and in the closing section we know that what appears to be a wound in his anus is "actually a glop of paint, ink, makeup, tape, cotton, tissue, and papier-mâché sculpted to suggest the inside of a human body...you can see the fingerprints of the person or persons who made it."[26] Dennis' quest, it turns out, has been to recreate those photographs he saw as a teenager. Once Julien and Kevin answer his letters, the three of them photograph a willing young man, and the result is the descrip-

tion we get in the last section of the book (quoted above). The process of this kind of production, however, is still dependent upon Dennis' having seen images of a (possibly) dead boy—just as Laura's photographs are dependent upon her having seen actual murders take place.

Not surprisingly, these fantasy images of murder have their true crime counterpart. Robert Ressler's book, *Whoever Fights Monsters*, is like other true crime narratives in that it features a series of photographs in the middle of the book, much like a centerfold. These photographs are of Ressler himself, the serial killers he interviewed, many of their victims, the crime scenes, and the law enforcement officers on various cases. Other books—such as Norris' *Henry Lee Lucas*—include photographs of the victims' dead bodies. Such photographs add to the scientific, or ethnographic, feel of true crime; but they are also clearly for 'sensationalist' entertainment purposes. They seem to ask: Can we read 'evil' in this criminal's face? Can we imagine what it must have felt like to be murdered when we look at the dead, mutilated, and naked bodies of his victims? Asking these questions, we are invited to engage in a simulation of our own, inseparable from the 'truth' of true crime.

Private Parts (1972) is a cult film in which a photographer's work is inextricable from his murderous acts, which involve killing beautiful young women who find him attractive. We discover that George, the photographer, is actually a woman whose mother essentially forced her to become a man because she thinks women are all whores. George lives in her mother's hotel, where she photographs beautiful women whom she later kills with a hypodermic. Her particular ritual—which is acted out in detail during several scenes—is to attach a photograph of her victim's face to a transparent, blow-up sex doll filled with water. When she gets excited enough, she uses a hypodermic to inject the doll with her own blood in an obvious reference to the act of ejaculation. In order for George to have a sexual relationship with anyone, it would seem, they must be converted into a photograph and blood must be shed. Furthermore, George's obsession with photography and murder is linked to her own desire to pass as a man. Although the photographic image is often understood to reproduce 'reality,' George must constantly confront the contradiction between realistic wishes to be looked upon as if he has nothing to hide, as if his normal image conceals nothing, so that he may do his 'work' as efficiently as possible. However, people who *con-*

[22] Charles Derber, *Money, Murder and the American Dream* (Winchester, MA: Faber and Faber, 1992), 37. I would want to add that Derber wrote this chapter before the widely publicized trial of the Menendez brothers in which they attributed their actions to childhood sexual and psychological abuse. At the time Derber's book went to press, media coverage of the case emphasized the brothers' desire to inherit their father's financial empire as a possible motivation for the murders.
[23] Ressler and Shachtman, op. cit., p. 33.
[24] Joel Black, *The Aesthetics of Murder* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), pp. 135-165.
[25] Directed by Todd Verow, and produced by Marcus Hu.
[26] Dennis Cooper, *Frisk* (New York: Grove, 1991), p. 128.

sume the serial killer image in narrative enjoy it precisely for the opposite reason: they 'know' the image isn't real, and are thus given the chance to feel as if they've outsmarted their own simulated culture. Viewers of photographic images generally do not expect a photograph to hide or alter any aspect of reality—they expect reality to be *revealed* in it. But viewers of the serial killer image can 'know better,' and that's the hook.

I'd like to close my analysis here with a discussion of two movies where serial killers try to convert themselves into photographic or filmic images which an audience gets to 'see through.' Both *Martin* and *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* hinge on the audience's ability to get at the 'truth' of the killer's image and understand him for the criminal that he is. In George Romero's *Martin* (1978), the teenage protagonist Martin believes that he's a vampire, having been told so by his religiously crazed grandfather. More than anything, Martin wants to convince himself and others that he is, indeed, like the monsters he has seen sucking blood in the movies. Martin 'becomes' a vampire by murdering people and drinking their blood; but he also calls a radio talk show and describes his 'vampiric' deeds. To embody the vampire image, in other words, he must act like one and—importantly—publicize his acts in the mass media. Unlike Martin, his grandfather, and some of Martin's companions, the audience of *Martin* is generally led to believe that he is not a vampire. He requires a syringe full of drugs to subdue his victims, and kills them human-style, with a razor. We are also given plenty of clues, such as Martin's strange home environment and his sexual uncertainties, that Martin has many reasons to be mentally unbalanced. While there remains some doubt about Martin's 'true' nature, it seems fairly clear that this is a movie portraying a person who *seems like* a vampire—so much so that his grandfather finally kills him by driving a stake through his heart. Part of the pleasure in watching this film is in knowing the 'truth' about Martin's crimes; he's no vampire, but a serial killer.

Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer (1990), loosely based on the life of Henry Lee Lucas and his partner Otis Toole, is about a prolific killer who feigns an image of normalcy and consumes movies of his own murderous acts. One of the most graphic and disturbing points in the film comes when Henry and Otis shoot home movies of themselves torturing and killing a family. Subsequently, they watch it and drink beer, joking around with the 'slo-mo' and 'reverse' buttons. Earlier in the film, after Henry and Otis murder two prostitutes, we discover that Henry views all human relations as a matter of life and death; for him, killing is an ordinary response to human interaction. "[Killing] is always the same and always different," he says, "It's either you or them—one way or the other." The pseudo-documentary style of the film calls attention to Henry's 'normal' act—the grainy photography and cinema verité acting invite audiences to see it as artfully constructed. In some ways, *Henry* is actually a boring narrative—although its content is often gruesome and terrifying, we are always returned to scenes of characters eating dinner or playing cards in an almost exaggeratedly normal manner.

What appears to be ordinary in this film turns out to be both realistic and fake at once. Henry's 'normal' facade conceals his violence and brutality. But the docu-drama artificiality of *Henry's* realism works to enhance our sense that Henry and Otis' ordinariness is sheer performance, and utterly extraordinary. While an audience can see through Henry's 'ordinary guy' act, doubts about what is ordinary remain. Just as *Martin* encourages an audience to ask if in fact Martin's vampiric image might not be reality, *Henry* offers us the possibility that serial killing might indeed be more normal (or, at least, common) than we think. Even when an audience is offered a way to deconstruct images in these movies, there remains a kind of escape hatch for simulation. One can believe and not believe in these serial killer images at the same time, as it were. And in the end, this escape hatch provides a way for audiences to ignore the critical aspects of these narratives as they apply to economic relations under post-War capitalism.

In Sheila Isenberg's *Women Who Love Men Who Kill*, women who have fallen in love with convicted killers describe their love for these men as a function of their confinement. That is, they enjoy their lovers' violent histories precisely because these men are separated off from normal life.[28] I think we can understand an audience's response to serial killer narratives in much the same way. While their content calls into question what Americans conceive of as a productive and normal life in capitalism, these narratives are also separated off from most consumers' daily lives by their exceptional violence. An audience may be able to accept a comparison between serial murder and capitalism precisely because serial murder is—for most consumers—an outlandish, distant problem. Pop true crime and mass culture are able to connect economics to death precisely because that connection is so well-contained by the crimes that construct it.

What is the truth of true crime? It may indeed be the reality of material life in capitalism, where people are encouraged both literally and figuratively to make and buy dead labor. But as long as that truth is leashed to simulated crimes in pop culture, it will be very hard for audiences to go beyond their criticism of murder stories to a larger criticism of capitalist production itself.

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[27] And, indeed, the idea of becoming an image is, in contemporary America (and the West) intimately bound up with becoming a commodity-object.

[28] Sheila Isenberg, *Women Who Love Men Who Kill* (New York: Dell, 1991), pp. 126-9. Here Isenberg compares these relationships to the ideal of 'courtly love,' in which romance is totally confined to the emotional realm.

by Philip Simpson

Gemini, the serial killer from *The Exorcist III*

Mystery Rider:
The Cultural Construction of a Serial Killer

In August of 1990, the University of Florida suffered a brutal and disturbing trauma as the new school year began. Within the space of a few days, five college students in off-campus apartments were viciously murdered by an unknown killer. In the early morning hours of Friday, August 24, 17-year-old Christina Powell and 18-year-old Sonja Larson were murdered and sexually mutilated in the Williamsburg Village apartments, four blocks from campus. The next night, Christa Hoyt, 18, was killed and then sexually mutilated and decapitated in a duplex also not far from campus. Finally, early Monday morning, at the equally close-by Gatorwood Apartments, 23-year-old Tracey Paules and her male roommate, Manuel Taboada, also 23, were stabbed to death.

Disclosure of the crimes was not immediate upon their commission but rather leaked out to the public in melodramatic doses. Powell and Larson's bodies were not discovered until Sunday. Hoyt's body was found later that night. Then, after the resultant panic had well and truly had a chance to infect the Gainesville populace, the bodies of Paules and Taboada were discovered Tuesday morning, further inflaming the community's simultaneous rage and fear and causing a mass student exodus from campus throughout that week. Complicating matters even more, the national and international news media, sensing a dramatic story even before the extent of the murder spree was fully known, flocked to a town ill-prepared for such an influx.[1] Print and television journalists competed for interviews and camera angles. Satellite trucks jammed the narrow streets, beaming the video images of frightened students to a world-wide audience. Phil Donahue broadcast a live segment from campus. Daily press conferences (joint efforts between the university and police investigators) were generally hostile, sometimes frantic in tone as students and reporters aggressively pressed the reluctant authorities for concrete information.

Those officials, primarily through Gainesville Police Department spokeswoman Lt. Sadie Darnell and Alachua County Sheriff's Office spokesman Spencer Mann, would confirm only that the first three victims (all female) had been sexually mutilated to varying degrees. More reluctantly, investigators finally admitted that Christa Hoyt had been decapitated. Through more unofficial routes, such as tales spread by hospital workers and off-duty police officers, frightened locals and eavesdropping reporters soon heard of more heinous details which may or may not have been accurate. Additionally, people could observe for themselves the police officers and state and federal detectives combing through lots and dumpsters adjacent to the crime scenes, perhaps in a search for body parts (as some reporters publicly suggested). Thus, while authorities continued to stonewall the invasive media and concerned residents with a news blackout, grisly rumors (most of them inaccurate) regarding the extent of the victims' mutilation swiftly spread in lieu of hard facts. Even more frightening, the killer had reportedly lingered for many hours over the crime scenes, taking long showers during which he not only cleansed himself but the corpses of all blood and incriminating semen, removing the duct tape with which he had bound the victims, posing bodies and body parts in carefully orchestrated tableaux, playing at least one victim's stereo in an apparent effort to mask the sounds of his activities, pounding on walls and floors for reasons which no one outside of the investigation knew but were horribly suggestive, in retrospect, of atrocity, dismemberment, ghastly interior decorating. No one knew

for sure what had happened in the time interval between the killer's forced entrance and delayed departure. But in the absence of authoritative information, public imagination quickly embroidered upon the scant available details and projected its own worst fears onto that void, filling it with the most gruesome images possible. Unsurprisingly, the most convenient images to fill in the intolerably blank mental screens were lifted in part from popular horror films. Archer Road, location of the third murder site and a thoroughfare linking the first two crime scenes, was renamed 'Elm Street,' a reference to the *Nightmare on Elm Street* film series.[2] Strangely, in the tense week following the murders, video stores close to the besieged campus found their shelves quickly depleted of slasher movies.[3]

In a form of dark serendipity which would not be appreciated until much later, a first-run horror movie, *The Exorcist III*, playing at a Gainesville theater in Butler Plaza located quite close to the murder sites, depicted a demon-possessed serial killer named Gemini. It is now known, five years later, the killer saw that movie before his murder spree, interpreted it as a 'magical' sign that the time was ripe, and adopted certain of its filmic terms as a way of structuring his own private horror show for later public consumption. One segment of his audience, the media representatives, also at a loss for adequate metaphors, similarly relied on cinematic shorthand to convey the atmosphere of the Gainesville siege; Mary Nemeth, for one, wrote that "usually quiet Gainesville, a university town in northern Florida, resembled the set of a horror movie."[4] Almost four years later, the killer would tell one of his defense psychologists that he had wanted his crime scenes to resemble the carnage typical of a good horror movie, like, say, the one he had watched shortly before his raid on Larson and Powell's apartment.

But Gainesville residents didn't need to turn to horror film fiction for parallels to their horrific situation. Twelve years before, in another northern Florida college town a mere thirty miles away, the Chi Omega sorority house on the Florida State University campus in Tallahassee had been the scene of a homicidal rampage by another campus killer. Escaped murder suspect Ted Bundy had entered the sorority house on a dark weekend night, bludgeoned four sleeping women (two of them fatally) with an oak club, and then fled the house before anyone really comprehended what had happened. Bundy was later tried and convicted for

[1] See David Wilkening, "When the Media Circus Came to Town." *Editor and Publisher* 125.10 (March 7, 1992).

[2] Jesse Kornbluth, "Panic in Gainesville." *Vanity Fair* (December 1990), p. 64.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 70.

[4] Mary Nemeth, "The Florida Ripper." *Maclean's* (September 10, 1990), p. 30.
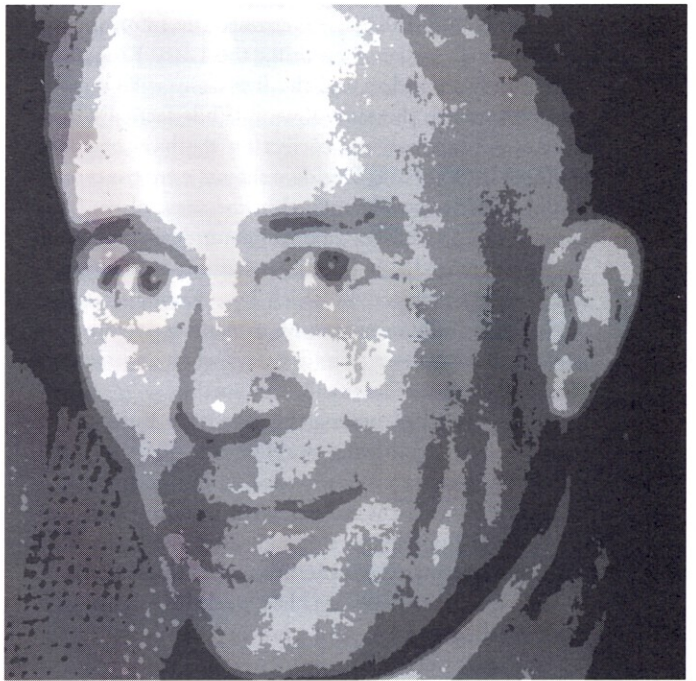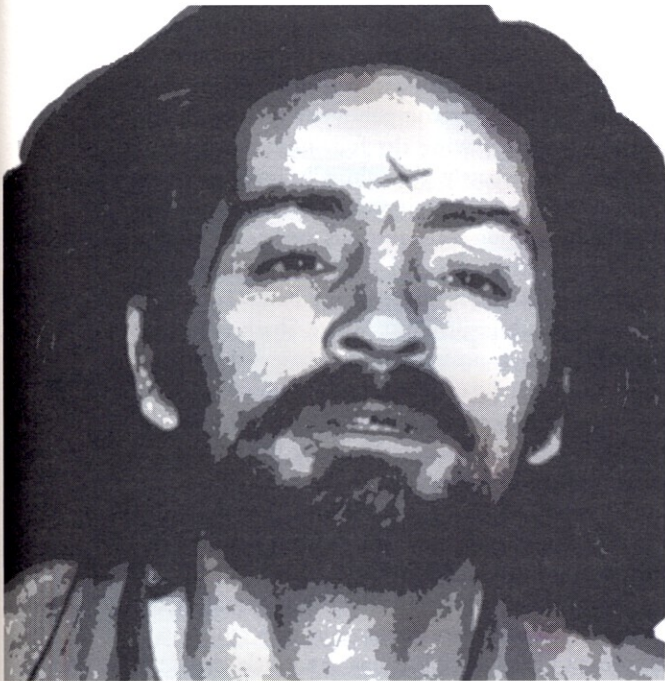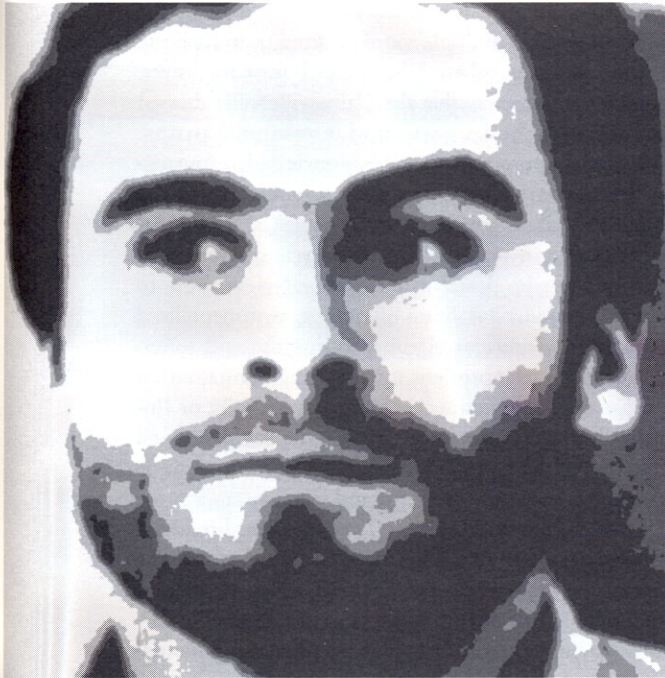
Clockwise: Ted Bundy, Wayne Gacy, Edward Gein, Charles Manson

these two murders and the murder of a twelve-year-old girl. Additionally, he was a suspect in dozens of other murders of young women in Colorado and the Pacific Northwest. Maintaining his innocence until the eleventh hour, Bundy finally confessed to twenty murders shortly before his 1989 execution. As one of the nation's most recognized serial killers, Bundy achieved special prominence in Florida, where his penultimate outrages and subsequent execution remained fresh in the minds of those faced with a new series of campus murders a year after his death. Many of those interviewed on the Gainesville campus, most too young to have been fully aware of Bundy's crimes at the time of their commission, nevertheless mentioned his name: "It's another Ted Bundy on the loose... Some sicko," said an 18-year-old female freshman.[5] As Jane Caputi notes in her book-length study of sex crime, Bundy's name, like the sobriquet 'Jack the Ripper,' has thus passed into folk mythology as a catch-all epithet for any deranged murderer of young women.

Ted Bundy's name was never far from the media representatives who covered the Gainesville murders. Most articles and broadcasts mentioned Bundy's name at least once; a CNN reporter even confused Gainesville and Tallahassee, erroneously informing an international audience awaiting the Larry King show that Bundy's murders and the five Gainesville slayings had occurred in the same town.[6] While factually inaccurate, the reporter was correct on the level of poetic truth, at least as far as Florida residents were concerned. It did seem to have happened in the same place. Most

compared real-life mass murders to fine art in 1827, the reports of graphic multiple murders attempt to replicate the tone and atmosphere inherent in horror narratives, in much the same way that the Gainesville killer dressed his sets with body parts and household props. Particularly, contemporary tabloid-style video journalism (perpetrated by more news agencies than the tabloids) routinely constructs its reportage of sensational murder cases in terms of horror-movie conventions. Ominous music, destabilized point-of-view shots to simulate the killer's stalking of victims, sentimentalized portrayals of 'innocent victims' to disguise and soften the narrative's true prurient interest in the brutalization of those selfsame victims, inappropriately jolly or linguistically clever nicknames given to the murderer—all are staples of the typical video segment purporting to be an objective recitation of events and facts.

ABC's March 23, 1994, *Turning Point* broadcast (entitled "Gainesville: The Price of Murder") at the close of the Gainesville murder trial serves as a representative example of this replication of horror-film formula, placing a group of hapless victims and potential victims in the path of a soon-to-be-revealed marauder. Not coincidentally, the broadcast opens with a series of what we might call 'college-life pastoral' shots, emphasizing the youth and gaiety of the victim pool as the students cheer football and basketball games; then the school band, in accompaniment to the athletic spectacle, begins playing the four-note shark motif from *Jaws*. Immediately, the culturally aware spectator to this carefully edited beginning of the broadcast will

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> And yet, had pulling the switch on Bundy ended his particular strain of evil? His work was seemingly being carried on just as effectively, as if the master were wielding the blade himself. So although everyone knew better, many people around Gainesville were struck that last, hot week in August with one cold and clammy thought... Bundy walked.[7]

In the space of the same article, Kornbluth also calls the murderer the "Gator from hell"[8] and 'Swamp Thing,'[9] revealing a tendency to demonize the all-too-human perpetrator as well as wonder elsewhere "whether Bundy's spirit could have been passed on to another man."[10]

Kornbluth's attempt to further dramatize an already melodramatic situation underscores a problematic mannerism in media coverage (be it print or electronic) of such events. Ever since Thomas De Quincey

compared real-life mass murders to fine art in 1827, the reports of graphic multiple murders attempt to replicate the tone and atmosphere inherent in horror narratives, in much the same way that the Gainesville killer dressed his sets with body parts and household props. Particularly, contemporary tabloid-style video journalism (perpetrated by more news agencies than the tabloids) routinely constructs its reportage of sensational murder cases in terms of horror-movie conventions. Ominous music, destabilized point-of-view shots to simulate the killer's stalking of victims, sentimentalized portrayals of 'innocent victims' to disguise and soften the narrative's true prurient interest in the brutalization of those selfsame victims, inappropriately jolly or linguistically clever nicknames given to the murderer—all are staples of the typical video segment purporting to be an objective recitation of events and facts.

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Print media, while not kinetically visual in the style of its video relative, performs its own sensationalistic tricks to heighten the drama. An article about the Gainesville murders in *People* magazine dwells in obsessive detail on the mundane and trivial commonalities of the victims' past activities, which take on poignant significance only with the reader's knowledge of what has happened to them. In addition to eulogizing the victims, newspaper stories and magazine articles of this type subvert their own pseudo-sympathy for the victims by displaying provocative titles or headlines (in which almost invariably a nickname for the killer will

appear) and utilizing the most attention-grabbing photographs (short of actual dismemberments), usually of grieving survivors or grim-faced men carrying sagging body bags. The text also often begins *in media res*, safely establishing the horrific tone necessary for sustaining reader interest, and only then backtracks to fill in the background. A typical example follows:

> The real fear—the one that transforms the ordinary and imbues everyday objects with palpable mortal threat—kicked in late Tuesday night while a bunch of cops and reporters stood outside apartment 113 of the Williamsburg complex, where the bodies of two University of Florida freshmen had been found two days earlier. Both girls had been butchered, mutilated with harrowing calculation, washed clean of their blood and left posed in an eerie Grand Guignol tableau sometime in the humid August night. A night not unlike this one. Now, as the cops made small talk, a Miami reporter pointed and said, "Look up there." Against the Venetian blinds in the upstairs apartment, two shadows moved in an odd angular pantomime. All eyes locked on the window until the reporter, with a nervous laugh, tried to make a joke of it. "Sinister, isn't it?..." Gainesville, Florida, had reason to be nervous. That morning, the fourth and fifth victims had been found in another off-campus apartment.[11]

The author creates the appropriate disjunctive pairing between theater and grim reality (which characterizes much of the Gainesville reportage) by invoking the Grand Guignol name and setting a jittery audience of cops and reporters in front of a never-explained pantomime shadowshow on the window blinds of two victims' apartment building. The implication is made clear later in the article—the crimes are consciously staged, "a quintet of murder and mutilation in three acts" that showed "brazen showmanship."[12]

In the atmosphere of fear and mistrust created by the murders, narrative media cast about frantically for heroes to offset the menace of the lurking killer. Detectives and university officials attempted to cast themselves in this mode while the media tried to accommodate their strongman posturing. However, the utter fictionality of this was immediately apparent to everyone, as the killer had struck at three different locations without being hindered in the slightest by a police presence in Gainesville. In an effort to reassure the citizenry that they were safe in spite of their local civic leaders' perceived ineffectuality and neglect, the media duly reported the influx of hundreds of extra law-enforcement officials and potential saviors, including the elite FBI profilers lionized in the fictional works of Thomas Harris. Reportage immediately focused on the FBI as Gainesville's last, best hope. *Time* celebrated the fact that "John Douglas, who helped track such serial killers as Charles Manson, ... 'Son of Sam' ... and ... Ted Bundy"[zzz] was in town. Robert Ressler, co-founder of the centralized, hi-tech National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime and author of several high-profile books and articles about serial homicide, tried to use his professional reputation to calm the tone and lessen the frequency of the superstitious comparisons between the Gainesville killer and Ted Bundy in an interview with Gordon Witkin of *U.S. News & World Report*[14]. Further conflating fact and fiction, the ever-creative Jesse Kornbluth lamented that fictional profiler Will Graham, protagonist of Thomas Harris's 1981 novel *Red Dragon*, wasn't in Gainesville to help his befuddled real-life counterparts.[15]

All of these visual and rhetorical flourishes in supposedly fact-based reporting are added, secondarily, to create suspense and anxiety and pity and indignation on the part of the avid spectator. And, primarily, to invest the killer with the supernatural or at least superhuman attributes required to captivate spectator interest and, hence, higher ratings or sales. The orchestrator of the reported events, the killer, is portrayed as diabolically cunning, strong, swift, ruthless, invisible, capable of physical transformation and perhaps even survival after death ("Bundy walked"). His crimes are inhuman: "The Gainesville killings were beyond imagination, like encounters with a terrible alien life form."[16] He is evil incarnate, yet he is often given a fondly roguish nickname ('nick,' of course, being another name for Satan) which betrays our fundamental need and repressed affection for Gothic villains who kill or menace innocent maidens.

Interestingly enough, the first prime suspect in the murders resembled such a Gothic villain. He was a University of Florida freshman, Edward Humphrey, whose unstable psychiatric history had resulted in two apparent suicide attempts (throwing himself from a

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 39.
[6] Charlie Tuggle, "Media Relations During Crisis Coverage: The Gainesville Student Murders." *Public Relations Quarterly* 35.2 (Summer 1991), p. 25.
[7] Kornbluth, p. 66.
[8] *Ibid.*, p. 64.
[9] *Ibid.*, p. 66.
[10] *Ibid.*, p. 77.
[11] Michael Reynolds, "The Terror in Gainesville." *Playboy* (February 1991),p. 72.
[12] *Ibid.*, p. 137.
[13] "Campus Ripper", *Time* (September 10, 1990), p. 43.
[14] Gordon Witkin, "Q & A." *U.S. News & World Report* (September 10, 1990), p. 18.
[15] Kornbluth, pp. 69-70.
[16] Reynolds, p. 137.

moving car and crashing another car into a utility pole) which left his face lined with scars immediately visible in a police mugshot reproduced in a *Newsweek* article. Looking like a monster to many people already, he didn't help his case any with his too-avid speculations about the murders to students and investigators, his beating of his grandmother, his leering at reporters, and his strange and apocalyptic pronouncements to investigators. Eventually cleared of suspicion by exculpatory DNA evidence, many investigators were reportedly loathe to let him go, simply because he *looked* the part.

Who 'The Campus Ripper' really was is a Louisiana native named Danny Rolling, recently sentenced to death in Florida following his courtroom plea of guilty to the five student murders. The phantom unmasked turned out to be far less than the supernatural being depicted by the articles written before Rolling's implication in the murders. Rather than an ogre, or even a hulking caricature like media portrayals of Humphrey, Rolling at the time of the murders was a sad-faced career criminal and wanna-be country singer on the run after the near-fatal shooting of his father, James Harold Rolling, in May of 1990. He is also a suspect in a three-victim murder case (a case which Gainesville investigators took an early interest in because of its similarities to the student homicides) in Shreveport, Louisiana, his hometown. From all accounts, he takes a masochistic glee in his down-and-out status, romanticizing himself as a friendless outlaw (or 'Mystery Rider,' as he calls himself in one of his own ballads, "a killer, a drifter gone insane... a rebel no one can tame") whose very existence as an outsider somehow ennobles him in comparison to the family and society which has ostracized, jailed, and disempowered him. But he apparently wants his protest to be recognized by the society he disdains, though he will not directly speak to that hated audience. For example, indicted in November of 1991 for the Gainesville homicides, he could not resist confessing details of the murders to a fellow prisoner, one Bobby Lewis, who in turn acted as verbal intermediary and translator between a mute Rolling and presumably exasperated law-enforcement officials. Even Rolling's guilty plea to the Gainesville murders, on February 15, 1994, was not so much an admission of guilt as one of authorship. Having pleaded guilty, he then retreated back an aesthetic distance and allowed observers to read into him what they would during the remainder of the legal proceedings against him. His periods of silence after each of the tantalizing confessions seemed designed to keep legal and media attention upon his case while simultaneously providing no answers or closure, and thus ensuring ongoing critical appraisal of his life and work. The initial appraisers of his most infamous crimes, the maintenance men and cops and paramedics

and reporters of Gainesville, satisfied Rolling's agenda quite thoroughly when they began collectively speaking of the murder scenes as particularly gruesome performance art. The ensuing speculation about what it all meant was just as satisfying, for no self-styled artist wants to be perceived as too accessible. (It's a fine line, of course, because he just as strongly doesn't want his audience to miss the point.) And to call him a monster with supernatural powers—what better sop to the defensively narcissistic ego which most writers on the subject agree is central to the serial-killer psyche?

Rolling is no monster, no reincarnation of Bundy or Jack the Ripper—but he is a serial killer who quite consciously authored an atrocious act of what appears to be social nihilism for his own relatively inaccessible motives. But really his actions were inseparable from the society which he seems to destroy by proxy. Rather than meaninglessly nihilistic, the murders were meaningfully destructive (and, ultimately, self-destructive). They were revolutionary in the sense that Rolling wished to reform the society so assaulted. In the truest psychopathic form, he wanted only to relay the message of his own profound suffering and not to champion something so abstract as a cause which might benefit others. The murders reflected his own fantasy life, but he also wrote out his crimes in a representational shorthand generated by commonly accepted cultural codes, and he did this so that the society he wished to horrify received the bulk of his message.

More specifically, he borrowed a fictitious name and a modus operandi from a horror film which provided him a paradoxically private imaginative language in which to compose his public hate letter. Mary Ryzuk recreates Rolling's reaction to a murder in *The Exorcist III*, the film he watched hours before killing Larson and Powell:

> The girl in the film was decapitated. He had never thought of that. The 'possessed' killer in the film called himself 'Gemini.' That's what he was! He was born under the sign of Gemini. Magical thinking was in effect. It was all a sign.[17]

Whether the adaptation of the film narrative to a real-life situation would ever be inferred by the spectators was not really Rolling's concern at this early point. In much the same way that authors are inspired by earlier works, he relied on the power of his presentation to captivate the audience and didn't worry so much whether his source material would be discovered. It is important to remember that Rolling's murders were committed in anonymity, and so any close reading of their content must necessarily suffer from the same difficulty we face in reading any found text (text meaning here any object to be scrutinized for meaning) of uncertain authorship. And if it seems dehu-

manizing to refer to the five Gainesville murder victims as 'texts,' it is important to remember that to their killer, they were equally objectified and stood in for something beyond themselves. The investigators charged with finding their killer also treated the victims as texts to be read and deciphered, hence the numerous references to 'messages' by the officially sanctioned readers of Rolling's horror-film script.

Reading that script confronts the reader with several complex issues. In a very real sense, Rolling's initially anonymous crimes force the reader to directly examine the nexus of authorial intent and reader response. In a 'reading' community (in this case, Gainesville, but also the rest of the world via satellite feed) where the 'author' (the killer) of a 'text' (crime scene) under reluctant scrutiny by that community is unknown, and where the single most determining factor in the community's reading is the desire to discover the author's identity through clues seeded in the text, the mediation between author and audience becomes much more problematic than traditionally supposed. For one thing, the exchange is weighted heavily to one side by the author, and the audience's reception is forced. Further confusing the issue is the fact that some members of the reading community (the investigators) are withholding important details of the text from others (the lay public) so that only a minority of the community possesses the whole of the text. Amongst that minority of privileged readers, there exists an even more select group of readers (the ubiquitous FBI profilers) granted elite status and esoteric insights by their colleagues. More problematic yet, the unknown author may wish to become known at some indeterminate point in the future, after a personally satisfactory number of texts have been produced and the author can stop to explain what he really meant. Which of course may be completely different, and no more or less relevant, than what his readers made of his texts.

When viewed in terms of this model, Rolling's murder campaign, in both its author-unknown and -known stages, takes on a disturbing shiftiness which hints at the futility of attempting to psychoanalyze any producer of texts (objects) through the produced texts. The producer himself is unaware of most of the readings generated by his own product once he parades it before a receiving (however unwillingly) audience. The audience optimistically assumes there is a coherent, unified meaning to be unearthed (the FBI is particularly guilty of this), when in fact there is no such uniformity. Rolling has his take on his crimes, the individual investigators quite another, the individuals grouped under the term 'public' yet another. The only commonality, the only hope of bringing hidden author and hostile audience to some negotiated link, is the one Rolling sensed upon seeing *The Exorcist III* and its demon-possessed serial killer:

the perpetrator of such offenses must surely be an inhuman monster, just like all those beyond our sphere of familiarity but even more so. Even Rolling himself had a hard time believing a bank-robber and drifter was responsible for creating something so self-evidently 'evil.' Therefore, he indirectly laid at least some of the blame for his actions on the supernatural: "God only knows there's forces in this world that... overpower even the strongest of us. I've seen 'em and I'm sure it's real just as sure as there's angels in heaven and devils in hell."[18] Though rhetorically careful to avoid accusing devils for impelling him to murder, Rolling does quickly link his vague term 'forces' (which could mean any disruption within his psyche) to the cosmology (angels and devils) that many in his conservative audience will accept as an indisputable given. He also argues, on the basis of this cosmology, that evil can claim anyone, even those who now sit in judgment upon him. So, at the end, when confessing to crimes that he knows will put him in the electric chair, he is careful to establish a linguistic bridge, and thus a potential point of reciprocity, between himself and the society about to execute him as a monster. The exile is not so distant as we may wish him.

To further this uncomfortable bond, he also cribbed pop-psychology clichés, another kind of reasonably accessible cultural code, to define himself in terms of a split-personality trinity. Whether Rolling did this as a pre-emptive basis for an insanity defense, or more likely as a naive attempt to understand and label the nature of his own pathology, is open to debate, but Rolling himself stated to Bobby Lewis that the three personalities were more concepts than entities. According to Lewis, Rolling conceived of himself in three conveniently distinct personas, any one of which might be dominant at a given moment. First, there was 'Danny,' the law-abider, the shy romantic, the altruist, the nice guy who doesn't alarm the neighbors. Then there was the 'Jesse James' personality, the one which inverted the accepted morés of polite society in Mr. Hyde-fashion and reveled in liquor, womanizing, and robbery. And then there was 'Y-Nnad,' ('Danny' reversed), the power-lusting murderer who wanted to control society through a reign of terror. ('Gemini' is apparently what Rolling called Y-nnad after seeing *The Exorcist III*.)

Finally, Rolling chose victims whose social status and gender would guarantee the maximum amount of outrage, shock, and fear from his audience. The four young women he killed were most appropriate for this

17 Mary Ryzuk, *The Gainesville Ripper*(New York: Donald I. Fine, 1994) p. 204.
18 John Philpin and John Donnelly, *Beyond Murder: The Inside Account of the Gainesville Student Murders* (New York: Onyx, 1994), p. 394.

purpose. They were in college, enjoying a social pre-eminence Rolling himself had never known, so their deaths would be personally satisfying to his need for recompense. Equally satisfying, the murders would be tragic for a culture which placed great value on youth, attractiveness, and college education. Also, not only would the women victims provide him with the kind of brutal sexual outlet he obviously preferred, their deaths would affect men and women equally hard, though in differing ways. The deaths would enrage many men, who at least to some extent viewed themselves as chivalrous protectors, and secretly titillate others who shared something of the killer's attitude toward women. The women would mostly be frightened, as they knew they were all potential victims.

Rolling ended his campaign of murder at the Paules/Taboada apartment, though he robbed a bank later that morning and went on to commit a series of other robberies until his arrest for the Gainesville bank robbery. Then he languished in captivity, already under life sentence as a habitual offender, until the Gainesville investigation retraced its route and found an incriminating tape recording, seized from an abandoned campsite discovered in the Gainesville woods only a short time after the murders. As the legal process cranked up against Rolling, the search for "Why?" continued, but perhaps one clue may be found in Rolling's statement to Bobby Lewis that he had planned to take one life for every year he had been punished at a notoriously harsh penitentiary. Ryzuk concurs: "He had been trolling for victims since he had been in Gainesville, ...having already made up his mind that he had to 'do in' eight—one for every rotten year he had spent in prison."[19] If one includes the Shreveport triple homicide in which Rolling has all but been convicted, the victim count of eight tallies with the number of years imprisoned that Rolling resents.

Provided that Rolling is telling the truth about this, he is similar to other serial killers in that, contrary to popular myth, the murder series typically has a preconceived end. When that end is reached (given that it is not stopped by external factors, such as premature incarceration), the murder series stops or falls apart of its own weight. Then the murderer can end his life in a state of relative contentment, either literally through suicide or more figuratively by letting society do it for him. Such a degree of premeditation argues against the common stereotype of the serial killer as classically mad or delusionary. Anthropologist Elliott Leyton, who has produced one of the more provocative serial-killer studies, argues that serial killing constitutes "a form of *suicide note* ... metaphorically so for most serial murderers, who sacrifice the remainder of their lives to the 'cause.'"[20]

In Rolling's case, as he was already on the run for the near-murder of his own father, and bitterly resent-ful toward the affluent, educated youths capitalizing on all the advantages he had never possessed, the 'cause' was to alleviate his own misery by robbing society of valued members and casting a pall of fear over a large city. One of his greatest pleasures must have been in knowing that he was finally giving the police a challenge they were ill-suited for. (Serial murderers are usually not caught until they make a mistake or are jailed for something else.) As a further insult to those he hated, he murdered using a specialized knowledge of law-enforcement procedures learned from his allegedly abusive father, among others. He vented most of his urge to mutilate on, and spent the most amount of time with the corpse of, a neophyte member (Hoyt) of the law-enforcement community.

The reason the murder series did not end with what was undoubtedly his most significantly rewarding murder perhaps lies in his remark to Lewis: he had two more years of previous confinement to murder for. But obviously, his will to viciously mutilate was gone. The next apartment he chose providentially harbored two victims whom he could kill at once and get the mission over with, if indeed that was his conscious agenda. He raped and killed Paules and left her corpse intact. And though he continued to break into homes around the area, there were no more murders. The sense that a mission had been accomplished might also explain Rolling's apparent serenity at his own heavily publicized trial. *Court TV* broadcast the trial live, and the media frenzy outside the courtroom (complete with the televised 'combat' reminiscences of veterans of the original scare) approached the excesses of August 1990. A female writer, Sondra London, had fallen in love with him (in a phenomenon not uncommon to serial-murder trials) and was busily writing his biography. Thus, he knew attention was again being granted to his message, and this time in more detail, since descriptions of the crime scenes were finally being made available. His defense, which relied heavily on a fashionable claim of childhood mental and physical abuse inflicted by his father, was not intended to free him or even spare his life. Rather, Rolling had a chance to make explicit the terms by which he had defined his suicide note.

At the conclusion of that trial, Danny Harold Rolling was sentenced to death, and for those most intimately concerned with the case, the ordeal was finally granted a welcome sense of closure. To them, the years of appeals, and the inevitable academic interest in Rolling and his crimes, are distasteful epilogues. For it is inevitable that in addition to the primary media coverage of the events, the Gainesville murders will continue to generate a small but significant number of secondary analyses. To date, two psychological studies[21] focused around the short- and long-term impact of the murders on University of Florida students have been published

in the professional journals. Two specific 'true-crime' books centered on Rolling's murders have been published, with more doubtless to come.

But from a more distant perspective, the Rolling case is one more dramatic example of a sociological phenomenon that receives periodic attention (and different labels) throughout the decades. The phenomenon goes by many names and descriptors, such as 'motiveless murder,' 'random murder,' 'multiple murder,' 'multicide,' 'mass murder,' 'stranger murder,' 'thrill killing,' 'spree killing,' 'recreational murder,' etc., but in the past fifteen years or so, the term 'serial murder,' supposedly coined by the FBI's Robert Ressler at FBI training sessions sometime in 1974, has become the most popular and superficially descriptive. Most simply, serial murder is the phenomenon of a series of murders committed over an extended period of time by one or more individuals. The murder series is far from motiveless, as is popularly claimed, but the motive is so privately idiosyncratic as to be generally inaccessible to the outside observer. Violent fantasy, and the repetitive attempt to inscribe that fantasy upon the surface of reality, defines the serial murderer.

But is the attempt successful? Many serial murderers who discuss their crimes in captivity refer to the messy realities of the act of murder as somehow inadequate compared to the ideal and power of the fantasy. This unsatisfactory discrepancy then compels them to repeat the murders in an effort to minimize the differences between actuality and fantasy, or in simpler terms, 'to get it right.' Ted Bundy, for one, referred to any one actual killing of a woman as a 'bummer.' The FBI's self-confessedly psychoanalytic definition of serial killing hinges on this proposition: that somehow, the repetition compulsion marks a continuous failure on the part of the actor to compensate for or overcome a stressful primal event somewhere in that person's past. Mark Seltzer summarizes the specialized law-enforcement definition of serial murder in this way:

> ... a failed series of attempts to make the scene
> of the crime equivalent to the scene of the
> fantasy—that is ... a failed series of attempts
> to make the content of the act and the fantasy
> of the actor ... perfectly coincide.[22]

Seltzer argues that this concept equates murder-as-adventure-serial with 'an addiction to representations' and hence "a pathological addiction to representation as the cause of violence."[23] In other words, the serial murderer fails to maintain an appropriate distance from the representation and substitutes identification for identity. His tendency to mimesis becomes all-consuming. When this occurs, Seltzer concludes, "identification brings the subject, and the subject's desires, into being and not the other way around."[24] Yet the subject vehemently denies he is so malleable to outside influence. Rather, he sees his murder campaign as the ultimate assertion of self-deter-

mination and social independence: "a claim of... self-possession as antimimetic in principle as it is fundamentally mimetic in practice."[25] The ultimately irreconcilable tension between these two competing principles generally leads to the failure of the act of murder to ease the murderer's identity anxiety.

However, *failed* is a deceptive term here, in need of immediate qualification. While it is generally true that the 'average' serial murderer claims the reality of murder is a let-down or 'bummer,' compared to how he thought it would feel, the *overall* evaluation seems to be that the project was a qualified success. In other words, any given individual act of murder falls short of the fantasized ideal, but the achievement of a *series* in some way compensates for the failure of any one installment. This presupposes, of course, that a series has a verifiable end, and is not merely 'canceled' or allowed to trail off without a 'series finale.' At the end of this series continuum, the author of the series can stop, look back, and evaluate its success or failure (usually from prison or death row). The higher the death toll and/or the more sensational the nature of the murders, the more successful the project. By and large, most serial killers who have consented to be interviewed appear relatively content, secure in their self-evaluations. At worst, they seem to regard their projects as noble failures. Expressions of remorse are typically self-serving, designed to curry favor with those evaluating their legal appeals.

Danny Rolling craved a dominant position in a social drama of his own orchestrating. He preselected the players in his private theater, knowing that their deaths would set into motion a cultural response whose moves, constrained by rigid codes and laws, would be entirely predictable. Punishment was inevitable (a regrettable by-product of media notoriety) but also not a factor in his calculations. What was more desirable was the media-purveyed horror show, performed and ended on his own terms. And so, like Bundy and other high-profile serial murderers, Rolling has achieved the cultural apotheosis he craved.

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19 Ryzuk, p. 204.
20 Elliott Leyton, *Hunting Humans: Inside the Minds of Mass Murderers* (New York: Pocket Books, 1988), p. 14.
21 Nancy K. Norvell et al. "Emotional and Coping Responses to Serial Killings: The Gainesville Murders." *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 181.7 (July 1993), pp. 417-421, and Monica Biernat and Michael J. Herkov, "Reactions to Violence: A Campus Copes with Serial Murder." *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 13.3(1994)pp. 309-334.
22 Mark Seltzer, "Serial Killers (1)." *differences* 5.1(1993), p. 94
23 *Ibid.*
24 *Ibid.*, p. 95.
25 *Ibid.*, p. 96.

by **Edward R. O'Neill**

The Seen of the Crime:
Violence, Anxiety and the Domestic in Police Reality Programming

The tenor of current media debates about the omnipresence and influence of so-called 'reality programming' is only slightly less melodramatic and hyperbolic than the programs under discussion. Certainly the rapid growth of the genre gives one pause. From police reality programming such as *Cops* and *America's Most Wanted*, *Top Cops*, *American Detective* —which will be the object of the present discussion—to talk tv (Oprah, Phil, etc.) to tabloid news like *Hard Copy* and *A Current Affair* to the more humorous reality programming like *America's Funniest Home Videos* (a latter-day descendant of the only somewhat more benign *Candid Camera*), the whole genre of reality programming has in only a few years taken over a sizable percentage of daily broadcast and cable time. Among these spectacles of shame, humiliation and violence, the police strain of the genre is probably the most violent, and yet, perhaps because one of the aims of such programs is to reassure viewers of the effectiveness of policing, these displays of violence have provoked less debate within the media than fiction films or rap music. How a genre could both depend upon and allay anxiety about violence, all the while escaping critical attention, is itself worthy of commentary. The present essay will try to broach this uneasy mixture of anxiety and violence by examining the generic affiliations and epistemological underpinnings of the genre with an eye towards the way television helps produce specific permutations in the public and private spheres.

All such reality programming seems to have some strong claim to authenticity that is lacking in fictional programming except the docudrama, to which reality programming is a sort of distant cousin. But police reality programming is particularly notable for combining elements of fictional styles to become more emotionally extravagant and sensational than traditional documentary television like the nightly news. Police reality programs vary according to the varying proportion and location of actual and staged elements. *Cops* comes close to an ideal of pure actuality: a camera crew follows policemen on their duties. Each half-hour episode includes three or four segments within which we see and hear cops driving and speaking to the camera about their duties, pursuing and detaining then interrogating and often badgering their suspects, then reflecting in voice-over or directly to the camera their perceptions about the events. The explicit claim (shown in a written

title at the beginning of each episode) is that nothing is re-staged or fictionalized in any way, and so the violence *Cops* presents takes on a peculiar intensity that is at once savage and banal.

America's Most Wanted on the other hand may use some actual documentary footage (from news programs or home videos), but it also mixes the actual locations and people involved in the crimes recounted. The participants in the events re-enacted narrate the events in a talking-head interview format in combination or alternation with those events restaged with professional actors. Familiar documentary conventions are thus freely combined with highly stylized fictional representations which are often partially differentiated by visual means: some re-staged scenes are done in grainier color, altered color, black-and-white, or in some other way visually altered to create a kind of dramatic intensity. Canted angles and hand-held shots also abound, and together these techniques seem to simulate a home-movie, you-are-there quality. But the use of these visual markers generally fails to consistently discriminate authentic from recreated footage.

The ostentatious visual style of *America's Most Wanted*, together with extensive and dramatic use of music and sound effects, point up the difficulties in locating generically this kind of reality programming in general, and the police strain in particular, between documentary and fiction. There is, to put it mildly, a tension between the self-conscious and aggressive stylization of the programs and their putative 'reality.' The result seems like a combination of a style reminiscent of film noir and of music videos coupled with the claims of referential authority of a news program[1]. Such extreme stylization and a self-consciousness about the camera—the camera which chases the suspects in *Cops* is exactly that, a wobbling, unsteady camera—would seem to answer a familiar demand for a more self-conscious form of filming and editing in which the audience could be made more aware of the constructedness and artificiality of the program which reproduces a reality without replacing it. The attention to the technique and mode of production and the diminished differences between documentary and fiction would seem to make police reality programming fall under the heading of what E. Ann Kaplan identifies as 'critical' texts. In exposing their own artificiality, critical texts are supposed to strip away the realist illusion by which the text claims to represent a world neutrally.[2] And yet, by staging dramatically powerful re-enactments of violent crimes and begging for 'justice' to be done (as in *America's Most Wanted*) or by staging police authority as violent (as in *Cops*), police reality programming does more to support recent conservative campaigns to beef up law enforcement and build more prisons than it does to present anything like social criticism. With its yoking together of documentary news-like traits and highly fictive aesthetic devices, police reality programming helps to question the assumption that self-conscious artifice produces any leftist bent, since the programs relentlessly stage scenes of violent crime being corrected by an equally violent legal

authority, violence by and against women being a privileged topic. In this light, police reality programming seems like a case of Brechtian distanciation or Shklovskian estrangement gone awry, an alienated text in the service of conservative ideology.[3]

One conclusion we might draw is that self-conscious artifice doesn't dispel the illusions of ideology when what the text presents is a violent play of power relations whose spectacle is made all the more powerfully appalling by claims to authenticity (as in *Cops*) or by an exaggeration of every possible stylistic device (as in *America's Most Wanted*). The *spectacle* of power in no way weakens that power's force, since when it comes to the exercise of power, it seems that no denial of power is actually necessary. In this sense it seems that such televised spectacles of violence function more like *phantasies* in the Freudian sense, which are carefully protected from reality-testing: the subtitle for *Cops* could easily be "A Suspect Is Being Beaten."[4] Against the liberal hopes of documentary, that representing a truth can be liberating, what police reality programming demonstrates and puts into effect is closer to fascism: a demonstration of violence which needs no cover-up, which wears no mask, but whose spectacle itself produces its effects. Police reality programming uses the gesture of the exposé—'look at the horrible reality'—which has been dear to the left, to induce a queasy or even pleasurable assent to policing and investigative force, and possibly to align citizens not with the repressed but with the power of repression itself.

Such a change in the value of the gesture of revealing the constructedness of dramatic representations may in part be tied to the historical changes which have been identified under the rubric of postmodernism. As problematic as the term might be, it has a certain usefulness. On one side, postmodernism has called into question the political usefulness of the terms true and false as they

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[1] The combination calls to mind the low budget 'noir'-ish procedural investigative films of the late 1940's such as *T-Men*.

[2] E. Anne Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York: Methuen, 1983), pp. 138-9. For another excellent statement of the argument on how specific aesthetic strategies are supposed to have specific political consequences, see also Peter Wollen on "transparency vs. foregrounding" in "Godard and Counter Cinema: *Vent d'Est*", *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982), pp. 79-91.

[3] For a canonical statement on the purported critical role of reflexivity in documentary, see Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); for a short overview of some of Nichols' points, see "The Voice of Documentary" in *Movies and Methods* vol. II (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 258-273. Subsequent references to the latter volume will appear as *MMII*. For an argument which questions the critical dimension of reflexivity, see Dana Polan, "A Brechtian Cinema? Towards a Politics of Self-Reflexive Film" in *MMII*, pp. 661-672. Here I must express a debt of gratitude to Lisa Kernan discussing with me her work on self-reflexivity and cinema.

[4] See Sigmund Freud, "A Child Is Being Beaten" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, tr. James Strachey, with Anna Freud, Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, vol. XVII (1917-1919) (London: Hogarth Press, 1955). Subsequent references to Freud will appear as *Standard Edition*.

pertain to representations. In his *Critique of Cynical Reason* [5], Peter Sloterdijk has proposed that the ideological unmasking of the false for the true is no longer effective. This seems to be the case in police reality programming insofar as the very 'authenticity' of the moving camera on *Cops* or the actual locations and events on *America's Most Wanted* goes hand in hand with a more artificial and stylized text.[6] It's as if a greater claim to reality partially undoes the codes of realism, returning to the scene of the crime not in order to show a reality but to de-realize that reality. Instead of revealing a truth behind a lie, the falseness of the lie itself becomes the reality in question, the 'reality' in 'reality programming.' The stylization of *America's Most Wanted* foregrounds the material actuality of the text while paradoxically increasing the referential authority implied.

This understanding of the strange hybrid, documentary-and-fictive quality of police reality programming also situates the genre in relation to the aesthetic strategies of both modernism and postmodernism. One major hallmark of modernism is the shift from a represented reality to the actuality of the artwork's materiality, its 'thereness.'[7] But in a postmodern aesthetic, this material actuality of the text, rather than verifying an authentic and immediate experience (as in a still-romantic modernist art) maintains a representational character (rather than rejecting representation in favor of abstraction), but the text becomes representationally undecideable, neither true nor false, merely a repeated or quoted cliché which points to nothing but its own enunciation. The reflexive and non-representational status of modernist art prepares the way for the reflexively *non-true* representations of postmodernism, in which representations can no longer function as true or false, their truth value being *suspended* rather than *negated*.

The oft-discussed quotationality of postmodern art thus marks a shift from the value of the text as representational or referential to its function as *discourse,* as a marker of its own quotation and enunciation which is not referential but self-referential and thus no longer involves a relation between a sign and a referent but rather an *indexing* of the utterance's own material conditions. Indeed, the shift from a modernist non-representational aesthetic strategy to a representational but self-referential postmodernist strategy recalls Emile Benveniste's distinction between *histoire* or language as statement and representation on the one hand, and *discours* or language as enunciation and address on the other.[8] A linguistic representation such as "Napoleon fought a battle at Waterloo" retains the same truth-value regardless of who says it, whereas a phrase such as "With this ring I thee wed" performatively ensnares the speaker and addressee.[9] The extreme structures of discourse or address in police reality programming and the self-consciousness of the camera's operation foregrounds the discursive or performative dimension of the aesthetic text. A similar complicated relation between visual stylization and implied or asserted truth claims is evident in Oliver Stone's films *JFK* and *Natural Born Killers,* both of which interrogate in some way film or media representations of violent events—Kennedy's assassination in the former and the effect of exactly the kind of programming currently under discussion in the latter. In both films a high degree of stylization accompanies some argumentative point, whether paranoid and focused (as in *JFK*'s conspiracy theory) or paranoid and diffuse (as in *NBK*'s purported indictment of media violence), without either film ever signaling any sense that there is any tension between a stylized and often hallucinatory telling and the claims to truth and authority either made or implied.

The admixture of documentary and fictional characteristics in police reality programming in turn suggests another generic filiation of the genre: namely pornography. Linda Williams has underlined this neo-documentary quality of pornography: that despite the fictional scenarios and roles and despite the presence of actors, the audience of pornography must feel that they are watching a film of an actual sex act, not merely a simulated one.[10] With its insistent display of wounded, dead and mutilated victims, *Cops* approaches the level of the mythical 'snuff' film: the power of these images depends upon our sense of the reality of the death and violence on display. It's not uncommon in certain police reality programming to see live footage of people recently dead or being killed on camera. A 1993 episode of *Emergency 911* actually showed footage of hostages at an electronics store hold-up being shot on-camera—a scene which the show replayed three times. Such a comparison between police reality programming and pornography leads one to wonder if, in its collapse of documentary and fiction, pornography isn't perhaps *the* postmodern genre, in which the true and the false come together in a way that undoes the distinction.[11] (Such an undoing of the documentary/fiction distinction is already present in Hollywood cinema when one understands this

cinema from the fan's point of view as being documentaries about their favorite stars acting.)

The sexual aspect of the violence of *Cops* in particular is thus connected not simply with what is represented (which is not particularly sexual) but rather with the very discursive and material dimensions of the text. Such sexual appeal is difficult to evince except by means of an ethnographic anecdote which suggests that the affinity between the 'visual evidence' of pornography and police reality programming can be perspicuous to those who find their specific phantasies engaged by such texts. The Tunnel, a gay bar in the East Village of Manhattan, regularly shows videotapes comprised of assorted clips from pornography, horror and miscellaneous Hollywood camp. Recently, one tape compiled and thus implicitly compared: excerpts from gay male pornographic specialty tapes consisting entirely of Latino men masturbating and smiling gamely at the camera, shots from *Cops* showing Latino suspects being detained and hectored by their captors, and home videos, such as the infamous Rodney King video, of black and Latino suspects being beaten. What such a compilation highlights is not only the discursive address of the 'solo' turn of pornography, with its unflinching appeal to the actuality of being-taped, and the appeal to authenticity of both professionally produced and homemade videos of violence, but also the accessibility of such authenticity to documentation of both sex and violence. Indeed, it is difficult not to recognize an elementary voyeuristic and exhibitionistic sexuality in the very emphasis on the actuality of seeing and being seen which reality programming underlines.

But if police reality programming seems to mark a kind of postmodern break in terms of its displacement and continuation of a referential authority, such programs also

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[5] Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason,* translated by Michael Eldred, foreword by Andreas Huyssen, Theory and History of Literature, volume 40 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

[6] Here we must note that the concept and format of *America's Most Wanted* is not in itself novel: a West German TV program dating back to the 1960's called *Aktenzeichen XY Ungelöst*—roughly translated "Unsolved Casefile XY"—used a similar structure. I have not been able to watch this program myself; I owe my knowledge of its existence to Samuel Weber and Jörg Bettendorf.

[7] See, for example, the work of Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism,* edited by John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

[8] On *histoire* vs. *discours,* see Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics,* translated by Mary Elizabeth Meek, Miami Linguistics Series No. 8 (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1971).

[9] For a discussion of the use of these terms in cinema criticism, see Christian Metz, "Story/Discourse: Notes on Two Kinds of Voyeurism," pp. 543-549, and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "A Note on Story/Discourse," pp. 549-565, both in *MMII.*

[10] Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

[11] Bill Nichols suggests that pornography and propaganda occupy opposite positions with respect to the visual evidence they present and the arguments they make: "Perhaps the farthest extremes of evidence and argument occur with pornography and propaganda: what would pornography be without its evidence, what would propaganda be without its arguments?" Again, police reality programming seems to collapse the two poles. See *MMII,* p. 273, note 3.

mark a continuation of a pre-modern aesthetic tradition, namely melodrama. The omnipresent and highly marked presence of the camera in *Cops* and the highly stylized dramatizations of *America's Most Wanted* both have affinities with the permutations of the relation between dramatic representation and audience address of melodrama. Whereas it is unlikely that the Greeks, for instance, identified and sympathized with Oedipus, melodrama partic-

tions in Freud's conception of phantasy and again helps to suggest the sexual dimension of such televisual texts.[16] It's as if the polarization of the genres depended in some obscure way upon a distinction between truth and fiction, and so both the generic active/passive and the epistemological true/false distinctions collapse together. If for Mulvey the woman's function as spectacle can be aligned with her being the object of an investigation, then in these programs
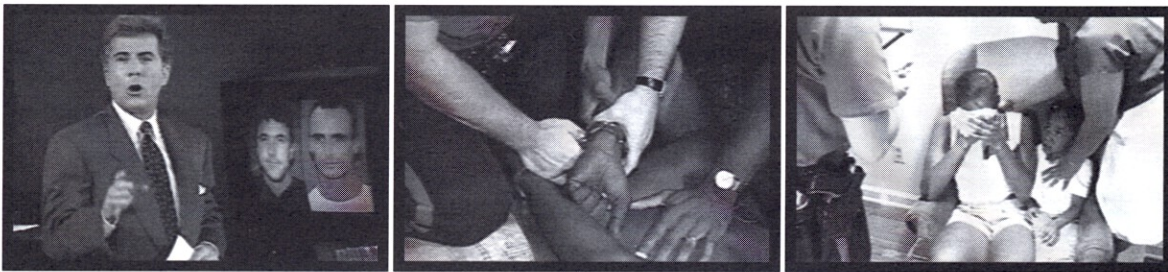
ipates in a historical shift in which dramatic representations successively incorporate more highly subjectifying effects, folding *discours* within *histoire* by portraying middle class domestic scenarios, that is, by representing 'us,' the audience who's watching, thus collapsing the addressee into the message. Here melodrama should be situated between the earlier emergence of the novel[12] and its later, progressive subjectification in modern authors like Woolf and James, and alongside cinema, which develops specific narrative and textual mechanisms such as point-of-view to enfold the audience within the narrative process to produce sympathy and identification.[13] But police reality programming also subverts some of the fundamental generic oppositions within which melodrama has been traditionally understood. Typically genres have been understood as divided between, on the one hand, the more active and violent, male-oriented genres like the Western, the gangster film, the detective and police story, and on the other hand primarily melodrama, which revolves less around action and more around passive suffering, internal states rather than external events.[14] This opposition between activity and passivity has been seen as central to Hollywood cinema in general by Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in which she sees the woman as a passivized visual image which interrupts the movement of the hero and his narrative, freezing up the movement of the story into a spectacle.[15] Here *Cops* seems notable in collapsing the two poles of classical genres, because in *Cops* the home, the domestic realm, is typically setting turned inside-out by violence or is penetrated by the police in search of criminal activity. The suffering and passivity of melodrama are collapsed with the active searching camera, and the emotional suffering of melodrama is coupled with physical violence of the more active genres which almost overflows to everyone, with the notable exception of the police, who are usually quite inexpressive and stoic. The reversibility or fluidity amongst the positions of the agent, the object and the on-looker recalls the fluidity of such posi-

everyone gets put in the position of the woman as spectacle in classical cinema—of being on display, investigated, probed, penetrated. 'Tabloid' news seems to lift this structure straight from *film noir* by repeatedly staging the story of a *femme noir*, of an evil, seductive, powerfully controlling woman who wreaks havoc in the life of some not entirely innocent man.[17]

But there's yet another connection between the stylistics of police reality programming and melodrama— name-

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[12] For an account of explicit reflections on sympathy within the early novel, see David Marshall's *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy: Marivaux, Diderot, Rousseau, and Mary Shelley* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).The early emergence of representations of modern subjectivity is also discussed in Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

[13] Although one must be careful not to assume that cinematic point-of-view produces identification with the diegetic viewer as its necessary formal consequence. See Nick Browne's cogent argument to the contrary in "The Spectator-in-the-Text: The Rhetoric of Stagecoach," *Film Quarterly* Winter 1975-76, vol. 29, no. 2, pp. 26-38.

[14] See particularly Geoffrey Nowell- Smith, "Minnelli and Melodrama" in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: BFI Publishing, 1987).
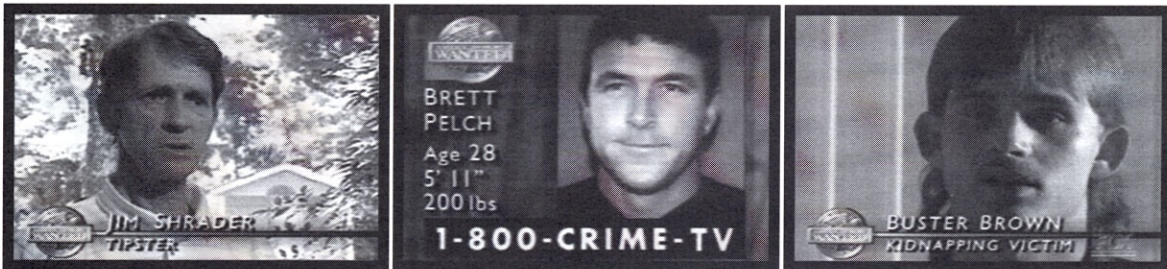
[15] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen*, Autumn 1975, vol. 16, no. 3.)

[16] On the reversability and fluidity of the positions of the phantasy, see Jean LaPlanche and J.-B. Pontalis, "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality," *International Journal of Pyscho-analysis*, v. 49, Part 1, 1968, pp. 1-18; published in French as *Fantasme originaire, fantasmes des origines, origine du fantasme*, Textes du XXième Siécle (Paris: Hachette, 1985).

[17] Anna Williams has argued, correctly, I believe, that certain examples of police reality programming repeatedly stage violence by men against women to effect certain ideological work. Whether this gender division predominates statistically in *America's Most Wanted* I cannot say, but other types of 'reality' programming, notably 'tabloid' news like *Hard Copy*, seem to me to have focused more on the evil female seductress I have written of in this passage, although I cannot adduce any precise statistical data to bear out this perception. See "Domestic Violence and the Aetiology of Crime in *America's Most Wanted* ," *camera obscura: a journal of feminism and film theory*, 31, pp. 96-119.)

ly in the extreme expressivity and transparency of the domestic realm in melodrama, along with the saturation of visual and musical expressivity, points underlined in different ways by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, Peter Brooks and Mary-Anne Doane.[18] That is, in melodrama the characters are given an extreme emotional transparency for the viewer, a hyperbolic expressiveness which even the music and the decor share. In this way melodrama and realism the structure of *Cops* in which the display of violence for home viewers has a powerful coercive force. But insofar as anyone's a potential victim of the crimes on *Cops* or a potential hero on *America's Most Wanted*, the viewers who watch the spectacle of suffering themselves become potentially watched by others. The power of the structure seems to depend upon this reversability or a threat of reversability, which threat can be linked either to the collapse of the

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both share an investment in the sensory accessibility of narrative information. That is, both try to make the story available to the senses, whether visually or acoustically, and this investment in sensory accessibility is continued not only by the visual stylization and use of music in police reality programming but also by its investment in a truth accessible through seeing. This visual expressivity is related not only to a historical shift which makes dramatic representations more highly subjectified but also to an evidentiary quality which is linked to the police procedures being invoked. *America's Most Wanted* notably depends upon the recognizability of the suspect's face: a sketch or photo of the putative culprit is shown at the end of each sequence, and viewers are entreated to call a hotline number if they spot the suspect. Although the *staged* re-enactments use an actor or actress who looks similar to the actual suspect, at the same time the *actual* image of the suspect's face is eventually presented as visual evidence. Police reality programming thus seems to make evident a link implicit within melodrama between emotional expressivity and a potential evidentiary function of a visual medium.[19] In disseminating the policing function to a wide audience under the guise of entertainment, the police reality genre recalls Foucault's investigation of power in *Discipline and Punish*. There Foucault paints a portrait in which punishment as the display of power's enforcement through the infliction of physical suffering becomes replaced historically by discipline as the monitoring and organization of the body in time and space in part by the internalization of a watchful authority rather than the direct application of force.[20] The advent and popularity of *Cops* would seem to ask us to revise the view that the movement from punishment to discipline is a single, one-time historical shift and perhaps to ask if it is not rather an on-going tension between two modes of social control. Punishment as the organization of many watchers around a singular spectacle certainly corresponds more closely to

addressee of the text and its message in melodrama mentioned earlier or to the self-reflexivity of the genre which seems to turn around on itself. This potential reversability of the positions of viewer and viewed is made most explicit in *America's Most Wanted* in which each individual viewer at home is encouraged to be on the look-out so that they might in turn become watchful heroes. The reversability of watcher and watched is made complete in *America's Most Wanted* when subsequent shows provide news-like follow-ups to earlier episodes, dramatizing successful captures and showing that in America today's most-watching are tomorrow's most-watched.[21] Here it becomes easier to understand why no critical reflexivity results from the self-consciousness of such televisual texts, since this kind of reflexivity is closer to the reflexive turning around onto the subject of the drives Freud describes in "Instincts and their Vicissitudes," a reflexivity which has little to do with the reflexivity of the philosophical, thinking subject which has been favored in film theory.[22] Here is where Foucault's vision of discipline as the internalization of a watchful authority becomes particularly blatant. If on *Cops* the

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[18] See for example Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976); Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire To Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). Anna Williams notes a suggestive relation between police reality programming and melodrama.)

[19] For a detailed and elegant discussion of such connections between the novel and the police, see D. A. Miller's *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).) At the opposite end of the spectrum, some faces in *Cops* will be blurred out, which oddly reinforces the face's centrality as visual evidence, exactly by means of its withholding.

[20] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).

[21] Here I am indebted to Lili Berko's conception of the reversability of surveilling and surveilled as discussed in her article "Surveying the Surveilled: Video, Space and Subjectivity," *Quarterly Review of Film & Video*, vol. 14, nos. 1-2, pp. 69-91.

viewer is put in the discursive position of chasing from the position of the cops, if, that is, we're asked to occupy the position of watchful police authority[23], in *America's Most Wanted* and similar shows, we're asked to take on the function of the police ourselves by dropping a dime if we recognize anyone pictured on the show buying a sandwich at the local market (as actually happened on one episode).[24] Such televisual possibilities extend the coimplication of *discours* and *histoire* already present in the cinematic versions of melodrama, since the viewer may become the viewed, the addressee becoming a possible object of the representation. Television, however, coupled with the phone system, seems to extend the technological possibilities of linking address and representation, turning the airwaves and the camera to television's audience in a way which is difficult to imagine in cinema. If fascism devolves in part upon unchecked power conferred upon the military or the police, then programs like *America's Most Wanted* effect a powerful strategy which might be called *media fascism*:; you become a part of the policing function of society, an arm of the law. The success of political initiatives to secure a larger police force becomes a moot issue when everyone becomes an agent of the state. The situation borders on paranoia, and thus finds an apt commentary in a beautiful, nightmarish and prophetic poem by William S. Burroughs, a poem which includes the line, "Thank you for a nation of finks."[25]

In his conception of the relation between a visible painful punishment and an obscure and internalized discipline, as well as in his radical reconception of private life, Foucault can be aligned with Freud, whom Foucault famously criticizes in *History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, but to whom Foucault acknowledges a debt in *The Order of Things*.[26] Foucault's distinction between punishment and discipline seems to parallel Freud's understanding of the superego as the internalization of a figure of authority. But the coupling of the domestic and personal realm in Freud with questions of the function of social control in Foucault can lead us to reformulate Freud in terms of Foucault rather than the other way around. On such a reading of Freud it's not that the father in the family is the model for social authority outside the family; it's rather that the family is the mechanism which effects social control inside the domestic realm by reproducing a structure of internalized watchfulness which does not originate in the family but is rather external to it. The domestic realm is another one of those scenes like the prison, the workplace, the hospital and the barracks, in which discipline is managed. These 'public' realms of observation and organization are not in opposition to the 'private' domestic realm of the family: the family is only the enfolding of these public domains in another site. Rather than being a realm protected from the exercise of an external state authority, the domestic realm is just another site at which power operates through discipline, the internalization of regulation: the home is just another prison.[27]

The genre of melodrama would fit at a juncture of aesthetic and political mechanisms, a juncture of the watching of punishment and the internalized watchfulness of discipline, situating this nexus at one potential location, namely within the family. Melodrama's insistence on a domestic space which is a realm unto itself containing emotional conflicts ironically insists upon the boundaries of this private space all the while making this realm transparent to us but opaque to those who live within it (who fail to fully recognize the emotion that is registered for us to read). To return again to Benveniste's useful terms, what melodrama represents as *histoire*, as representation, is a privacy which is belied by the very modality of address or *discours* by which this private world is rendered available to us as viewers. This domestic world is both transparent to the moral character of our watchfulness and insistently opaque in being delimited from the world around it, thus reproducing the strangely inside-out structure of privacy as an internalization of the power of being watched even within the limits of what can be seen by others. The domestic realm is both pictured as a limit of social control and yet all the same this realm and its very delimitation produces a space within which such social control is effectively reproduced.

This strange relation of an 'inside,' private domestic realm and an 'outside,' state authority, in which the former reproduces the latter even while seeming to keep it out, is itself reproduced in *Cops*, which effects a twist on its historical antecedents in melodrama. In the classical construction of the domestic space in a Griffithsian crosscutting, the home is under threat from an attack which is seen as external to that space, and so familial and social authority intervene to protect the sanctity of the home. (D.W. Griffiths' 'The Lonely Villa' (1909) would be an

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[22] See Sigmund Freud, "Instincts and their Vicissitudes" in *Standard Edition*, vol. XIV. One of the tentative presuppositions that motivatezs the current essay is that the philosophical and psychoanalytic model of the thinking and speaking subject which has been central to film studies is perhaps less appropriate for discussing television, and that psychoanalytic terms like *phantasy* and *instinct* might work better.

[23] One short-lived reality show (circa 1993) worked a particularly strange hybrid: fictional crime scenarios were stylishly acted out and then investigated by a wise-cracking young detective who addressed the moving camera as his side-kick— à la *The Lady in the Lake*. Needless to say, the effect was neither intriguing nor amusing.

[24] The German program with the same structure actually involved a pause during which viewers could call in so that the resulting leads could be broadcast later the same night. The BBC miniseries *Prime Suspect 1*. contains a moving sequence in which the major characters watch (or do not watch) a similar program, the effect being to contrast their diverse but similarly tense domestic situations.

[25] The poem is entitled "Thanksgiving Prayer," and a recording of Burroughs reading the poem, accompanied by stentorian musical posturings, has been used as the soundtrack for a short film by Gus Van Sant.)

[26] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1980) and *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1970), esp. Chapter 10, Section V, "Psychoanalysis and Ethnology," pp. 373-386.)

[27] I am indebted here, as earlier, to D. A. Miller's rich and complex book *The Novel and the Police*, whose great subtlety of argument I not been able to reproduce.

emblematic construction.) This investment in the sanctity of the home has been the subject of a cycle of recent thrillers, starting, it seems, with *Fatal Attraction* and including *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle, Single White Female, Unlawful Entry, The Crush,* and other direct-to-cable/video productions. In these thrillers a home is under siege from an external force which, in many cases, has already penetrated inside—the roommate, the nanny, etc.—an 'external' force usually embodied by a woman, preferably childless, i.e. 'undomestic,' thus representing a threat which must be expelled, cast out from where it doesn't belong to set everything right.[28] This kind of trajectory from external to internal threat has been detected within the horror genre. In Robin Wood's influential discussion of the historical trajectory of the American horror film, he marks a shift in where the monster is located.[29] For Wood post-*Psycho* there's a notable tendency to locate the monster as within or a product of the family itself—witness *Halloween* and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*—the threat to normality thus being normality itself. Similarly, in *Cops* there's a collapse—not of the monster and the family, but of the threat of violent intrusion to the family and of the force that is supposed to provide protection from this threat, namely the police. The threat of an invaded domesticity to which the police ostensibly provide protection can no longer hold in *Cops* since *Cops* invokes the very anxiety the show ostensibly allays, not only of the penetration of the domestic scene by crime but of the penetration of the domestic by the police protectors of the sanctity and privacy of that very domesticity. In *Cops* the threat to the home and the protection of the home against that threat have been collapsed: the cops defend the privacy of the home from the violence implicit within that home by themselves invading that space in the name of its defense. This is most notable in *Cops* when the intrusion into the home is verbally justified as protecting its members from themselves: the function of police as quasi-social workers helps to humanize and justify exactly their exercise of power.[30]

Ultimately, though it is not simply the cops of *Cops* nor the peeping camera of *America's Most Wanted* which penetrate the domestic sphere, but television itself as the material, technological reception device which enters the domestic sphere like a Trojan horse, filling the home with representations of other homes, thus uncannily turning the home inside out.[31] Just as Freud points out that there is no running away from the instincts as signs of internal tensions (as we can run away from disturbing external stimuli), so there is no flight or retreat we can make when the very division between the inside of the domestic sphere and its outside has already been broached, as it already has been by the presence of the television itself as a foreign agent.[32] The idea of a safe domestic space relieves the anxiety of a dangerous intrusion, while the repeated staging of this intrusion by the police themselves increases the wishful image of such a safe domestic space. The relation between the wish for protection from violence and the staging of violence is viciously circular, each defining and maximizing the effect of the other. The dynamic enacts a relation

between containment and liberation in which liberation does not function as an end to containment but only serves as another form of containment, privacy and domesticity being exactly forms of containment.

Sitting on the couch in the comfort and privacy of my home, I watch another home, not so different from mine, being penetrated by the police and/or the camera, and so I'm made thankful for the penetrability of that home on the screen, all the more thankful for the safety of my own home, while at the same time I'm shown exactly how tenuous this privacy and comfort are. In the meantime, I am in my more and more un-home-y home, waiting for a knock upon the door. Who's there?[33]

[28] *Alien* and *Alien3* are notable for the way the intruder penetrates the body in the former and the woman's maternal body in the latter. In the present context it is notable that in *Unlawful Entry* the intruder is none other than: a cop.)

[29] For a summary of many of Wood's points, see "An Introduction to the American Horror Film" in *MMII*, pp. 195-220, esp. pp. 208-210.

[30] One listener who heard an earlier version of this paper commented that she found the moments in which the cops talk about their feelings about their work to be the single points of humanity in *Cops*. I, on the contrary, find these moments oddly clichéd and singularly inhuman: an attempt to 'humanize' authority and thus to mask and justify the violent intrusions the show endlessly repeats.)

[31] The tension between television's *representations* of domesticity and its actual material *intrusion* into the domestic sphere is discussed with great force in Lynn Spigel's "Installing the Set: Popular Discourses on Television and Domestic Space, 1948-1995" in *Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer*, edited by Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992). The present essay is part of a larger project which examines the construction of the domestic sphere in a number of television programs—from *I Love Lucy, The Honeymooners* and *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* through *Mary Tyler Moore* and *Cops*—in terms of a tension between television's *representations* of the domestic sphere and the unrepresentability of the *anxiety* provoked by television's advent within that sphere. The study draws on Kierkegaard, Freud and Heidegger in order to theorize changes in the concept of representation in modernity, specifically in relation to technology and anxiety. For an illuminating discussion of television,technology and reprsentation, see Samuel Weber's forthcoming *Mass Mediauras*.

[32] On the relation between internal and external with respect to the instincts, see "Instincts and their Vicissitudes,"*Standard Edition*, vol. XIV.

[33] Here I mean to invoke a pair of references whose exact links I cannot spell out in the context of this short essay. By saying our contemporary, tv-ridden home is 'un-home-y,' I would invoke Freud's discussion of *unheimlich* in "The Uncanny," *Standard Edition* vol. XVII. Further, my last few words are a quotation from T. S. Eliot's disturbing dramatic poem concerning domestic and media violence, "Sweeney Agonistes" from *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1971).

The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme:
(Dis)Figuring Feminism, Family, Irony, Violence

Basic Instinct

by **Julianne Pidduck**

Gus: "Well ain't that cute. They've got his and hers Picassos."
Nick: "Gus, I didn't know you even knew who Picasso was."
Gus: "Sure I do. It says right here." (points to signature)
Nick: "Hers is bigger."

"Hers is bigger" neatly sums up Catherine Trammell's relationship to the male characters in Paul Verhoeven's controversial 1992 thriller, *Basic Instinct*. Bigger house, much bigger bank account, bigger IQ, more university degrees, faster car, bigger sexual vocabulary, Trammell (Sharon Stone) plays like the ultimate nightmare (or fantasy) of the masochistically-inclined average fellow. Wielding a K-mart ice-pick with wild abandon at the apex of sexual ecstasy, Sharon Stone gave 'castration complex' a whole new lease on life in 1990s post-feminist North America. Now, some three years later, *Basic Instinct* has been indelibly registered in the popular memory as a film about homopathic lesbian and bisexual psychokillers. Within critical circles also, the film is discussed most commonly in relation to the Queer Nation protests and lesbian representation.[1] In this article, I would like to shift the framing of the film, relating it instead to an extensive 1990s cycle of thrillers featuring women who kill. I will discuss this 'fatal femme' cycle, with particular reference to *Basic Instinct*, in relation to an ongoing contemporary discursive shift around the terms of gender, power, and violence.

The Fatal Femme Cycle

While *Basic Instinct*'s over-abundance of lesbian and bisexual female murderers link it to homophobic Hollywood tradition, its cast of killer women also articulates with a recent resurgence of the *femme fatale* of classic *film noir*. Catalysed by the success of a jarringly anti-feminist *Fatal Attraction*, this 1990s cycle includes a panoply of gems with varying budgets and coherence: *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle, Final Analysis, Poison Ivy, Body of Evidence, The Crush, The Temp*. More recently, the trend continues with nouveau-*noir* projects like John Dahl's *Red Rock West* and *The Last Seduction*, even as more established auteurs get into the act with Yves Simoneau's *Mother's Boys*, Peter Medak's *Romeo is Bleeding*, Stephen Frears' *The Grifters*.[2] Countless made-for-tv movies, minor features, and straight-to-video potboilers complete the picture of what I call the 'fatal femme' cycle in 1990s nouveau-*noir*.

Finally, as Jim Collins[3] suggests, this contemporary revamping of a traditional genre ranges from the faithful reworking of the classic formula to its ironic redeployment — what he calls 'eclectic irony.' Even in the limited time-span of the current fatal femme cycle, we can trace a movement from the hyper-serious *Fatal Attraction* which in some ways spawned the cycle, to the tongue-in-cheek ironic overdrive of *Basic Instinct*, to an even more recent hyper self-conscious spin on the formula with the likes of *Fatal Instinct, Serial Mom, So I Married An Axe Murderer, Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and so on. These spoofs explicitly play off the provocative formula of the earlier films of the cycle. With what Collins calls their 'self-referential qualities,' I will argue that these spoof films can highlight the already implicitly or explicitly ironic and/ or hyperbolic qualities of the cycle generally.

According to the marketing logic of the New Hollywood, these various projects rework the formula of high-end 'A' films like *Fatal Attraction* or *Basic Instinct* (or, more recently, *Disclosure*, a film which, although missing the cycle's on-screen violence component, belongs thematically to the cycle). The cycle offers the unbeatable combination of naughty sex and violence, with the added titillating ingredient of politically-incorrect gender dynamics embodied in the figure of what I call the 'fatal femme.' (After all, these higher budget films and their spinoffs gained tremendous publicity from the Queer Nation and feminist controversies which surrounded their release.) My term 'fatal femme' signals a 1990s incarnation of the *femme fatale* of classic *noir*. Sharing her predecessor's smart mouth and sexual savvy, the fatal femme ups the ante of earlier, more muted cinematic codes of sexuality and graphic violence. From Barbara Stanwyck's devious manipulations of the hapless Fred MacMurray in the 1944 *Double Indemnity*, we shift gears into *Basic Instinct*'s no-holds-barred opening scene of sexual frenzy and icepick abandon.

The link between gender issues in classic and contemporary *film noir* is more than coincidental. For if the *femme fatale* in wartime and post-war cinema is often connected to a deep-seated unease in the shifting gender roles in that society, the fatal femme offers fertile ground for theorists to speculate on the perceived threat of feminist gains in the 1990s. Neither a simple reflection nor a direct causal agent of societal (anti) feminism, the self-conscious generic deployment of the 1990s fatal femme marks the ongoing troubled status of issues of gender, violence, and power within North American society.

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[1] The North America-wide activist group Queer Nation staged high-profile protests around *Basic Instinct*'s 1992 release. The group charged that the film continued a long-standing Hollywood convention of depicting lesbians and gay men as murderers and psychotics. By leafletting the cinemas with pamphlets announcing that "Catherine did it," the activists hoped to spoil the film's 'whodunnit' draw for the audience. While putting the critical notion of 'homophobia' into broader discussion, these protests undoubtedly also helped increase the film's profile and attendance. The political stakes and arguable homophobia of *Basic Instinct* have been discussed extensively elsewhere, including by Judith Halberstam in "Imagined Violence/ Queer Violence: Representation, Rage, and Resistance", *Social Text* 37, Winter 1993, pp. 187-201 and by Lynda Hart in "Why (The) Woman Did It: *Basic Instinct* and its Vicissitudes", *Fatal Women: Lesbian sexuality and the mark of aggression* (Princeton University Press 1994), pp. 124-134; and in my *The 'Fatal Femme' in Contemporary Hollywood Film Noir: Reframing Gender, Violence, and Power* (Master's Thesis, Concordia University, 1993).

[2] While belonging thematically to the cycle, *Romeo is Bleeding* and *The Grifters* vary slightly from the other films in their status as crossover arthouse films. For this reason, and also because of their textual complexities which exceed the cloning tendencies of the New Hollywood cycle at hand, I will mention them only briefly here.

[3] Jim Collins, "Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity", *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, ed Collins, Radner, Preacher Collins (Routledge 1993), pp. 242-264.

The Backlash Thesis:
The fatal femme takes on the embattled family

Now, we might choose to look at the fatal femme phenomenon from several feminist perspectives. The first, perhaps most intuitively appealing position links this cycle to a widespread anti-feminist backlash articulated through the negative stereotyping of strong, sexually assertive women. Queer Nation protests around *Basic Instinct*, for example, called attention to Hollywood's ongoing pathologization of lesbians which both springs from and reinforces widespread homophobia. More generally, Susan Faludi, author of the best-selling *Backlash*, cites Adriane Lyne's 1989 *Fatal Attraction*, the explosive forerunner to the 1990s fatal femme cycle, as representative of 1980s backlash cinema.

The backlash shaped much of Hollywood's portrayal of women in the '80s. In typical themes, women were set against women; women's anger at their social circumstances was depoliticized and displayed as personal depression instead; and women's lives were framed as morality tales in which the "good mother" wins and the independent woman gets punished. And Hollywood restated and reinforced the backlash thesis: American women were unhappy because they were too free; their liberation had denied them marriage and motherhood.[4]

As Faludi suggests, from the glaring example of *Fatal Attraction*, to *Body of Evidence, The Crush, Mother's Boys*, and perhaps most notably *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*, many films in the fatal femme cycle pit a publicly powerful and sexually aggressive, internally needy and psychotic independent woman against a struggling but ultimately virtuous (and victorious) yuppie nuclear family. In *Cradle*, as in *Fatal Attraction*, nanny-from-hell Rebecca de Mornay drives a wedge between the happy couple (Annabella Sciorra and Matt McCoy), ultimately making a play to off the wife and take her place within the idyllic suburban nuclear family unit. To add unlikely insult to injury, de Mornay targets this particular family because Sciorra had charged the nanny's gynecologist husband with sexual assault — an accusation which resulted in his suicide and de Mornay's miscarriage. *Cradle* typifies the trend identified by Faludi where endemic conflicts around social power, sexuality, and marital stability are fought between marauding fatal femmes (usually blonde) and good wives and mothers-of-children (commonly brunette) and played by Anne Archer or Annabella Sciorra). Men, meanwhile, rest disingenuously on the sidelines, trophies and innocent bystanders in the lethal cattiness of female conflicts.

Janey Place suggests that classic *film noir* often symbolically contained the *femme fatale*'s disruptive machinations either through narrative closure (death or marriage), or by symbolically rendering her impotent. "The ideological operation of the myth (the absolute necessity of controlling the strong, sexual woman) is thus achieved by first demonstrating her dangerous power and its frightening results, then destroying it."[5] Several films of this 1990s cycle perform the ideological function of 'containing' the

sexually transgressive, independent woman through narrative closure. At times, the fatal femme is simply deactivated, pushed out of contention, as in Demi Moore's and Lara Flynn Boyle's disgraceful firings in *Disclosure* and *The Temp*, respectively, or Alicia Silverstone's relegation to a mental institution in *The Crush*. Even more decisively, the ultra-violent eradication of the fatal femme commonly salvages what remains of the life of the embattled object of her obsession (*Final Analysis, Single White Female*) — or redeems the nuclear family (*Fatal Attraction, Cradle, Body of Evidence, Poison Ivy, Mother's Boys*).

In fact, Faludi's backlash thesis rings truest in films situated in and around home and hearth, where narrative containment or hyper-violent liquidation of the threatening fatal femme is *de rigueur*. Recalling the audience's cheers when Anne Archer finally blows away Glenn Close in *Fatal Attraction*, or our intended satisfaction as de Mornay falls to her death only to be impaled (oh-so-subtly) on the family's white picket fence, we can see the high emotional stakes which drive the backlash narrative containment of its anti-heroine. Within a current political landscape obsessed with the bolstering of faltering 'traditional family values' (whatever these may be), the defence of the seemingly infinitely fragile nuclear family remains a mainstay in contemporary Hollywood from *Disclosure* to *The River Wild* to *Forrest Gump*. In contrast with the gritty inner city settings of classic *noir,* North American anxieties over the integrity, even the survival of 'family' gets projected onto the psychodynamics of white, affluent, suburban families. These neighbourhoods are strikingly emptied of signs of race or class difference (except for the odd expendable Latina maid or handyman). The cycle presents, then, both a highly paranoid and a highly selective account of the perils of 1990s 'family' life.

A Fly in the Soup:
Ambivalence in Containment, and Escape

Yet even in the face of such seemingly airtight damage control, the fatal femme cycle demonstrates a recurring ambivalence in the defeat of its (anti)heroines. While featuring endangered cute young children, *Fatal Attraction, Cradle,* and *Mother's Boys,* seem to *require* the horrible execution of the intruder; in many other films, the fatal femme eludes complete containment. Even in the case of the films set within the site of the nuclear family, this institution is commonly scripted as always-already troubled — often from within. *The Grifters,* for example, presents an amoral family unit if there ever was one; in keeping with the film's rampant distrust among its mother-son-daughter-in law trio, the film ends appropriately with Angelica Huston's ultimate betrayal, shooting her son (John Cusack), and departing with the loot. In *The Crush*, the manipulative, violent 'crush' of a lethally precocious teenager (Alicia Silverstone) is shown to emerge directly from an ugly, borderline incestuous relationship with her overbearing father. Similarly, *Poison Ivy* paints a deeply dysfunctional family portrait; here, quintessential jailbait Drew Barrymore merely plays off existing textbook

Freudian tensions as she seduces the father (*Picket Fences'* good father Tom Skerritt) and executes his ailing, estranged wife (Cheryl Ladd). After the interloper falls to her death, the real daughter (Sarah Gilbert, the mouthy middle child of TV's dystopic *Roseanne*) has little family left for comfort. (*Poison Ivy* exemplifies the contradictory star codes which must inform a literal structural analysis of plot; the casting of Skerritt, Gilbert, and Barrymore infuses an important level of self-parody into the film — a feature which exemplifies many of the films of the cycle.)

Sylvia Harvey[6] notes that the classic *noir* of the 1940s and 1950s was marked by the "strange and compelling absence of 'normal' family relations." She stresses that the nuclear family forms such a centrepiece of North American cultural iconography that its absence signals profound societal malaise related to post-war shifts in gender relations. Typically, classic *noir* either sidesteps familial relations all together, or portrays them as problematic (as in *Mildred Pierce*). In the contemporary fatal femme cycle as suggested above, the family's renewed centrality suggests its renewed troubled status. As Faludi suggests, some films present the independent career woman as Enemy Number One of the nuclear family — an enemy who must be eradicated, often by the Good Mother figure. Still other films deploy the fatal femme figure to interrogate always-already deeply dysfunctional family or male-female relationships — time bomb relationships which are catalyzed and ultimately exploded, leaving little of the family intact after the fatal femme's passage. Although the errant husband (Willem Dafoe) of *Body of Evidence* returns to his loyal wife (Anne Archer), he is forever tainted, haunted by the memory of dangerous, naughty sex with (who else but?) Madonna.

As Harvey suggests, the ideological force of the family or heterosexual coupledom means that it figures strongly even when off-screen. *Single White Female,* for example, is haunted by the spectre of a failed romance. Protagonist Bridget Fonda, after all, only becomes vulnerable to Jennifer Jason Leigh's proto-lesbian fatal femme after kicking out her cheating boyfriend.[7] Much more emphatically, *Basic Instinct*'s post-familial filmscape is littered with families dismembered by violence. Nick Curran's wife, we discover, has committed suicide after his dubious shooting of two tourists. No one is innocent in this film, but the fatal femmes wreak by far the most damage: Catherine Trammell is implicated in the 'accidental' deaths of her parents and two boyfriends; Hazel Dobkin murdered her husband and children with a carving knife; Roxy slashed her younger brother's throats with daddy's razor, while Beth is suspected of shooting her ex-husband. This all-out assault by fatal femmes against the nuclear family and heterosexual romance indicates, as in the classic *noir*, a violent acting-out of the troubled status of these institutions.

In relation to debates about backlash, while some of these films enact a vitriolic narrative punishment of the fatal femme, the range of narrative strategies across the cycle would indicate the emergence of a more ambiguous and diffuse statement about family. As Harvey suggests in relation to classic *noir*, "the absence or disfigurement of the family both calls attention to its own lack and to its own deformity."[8] The cycle's specific generic blending of suspense, melodrama/ romance, and horror infuses the intimate spheres of family and male-female relations with an emotional overlay of fear, pathology, and the threat of physical violence. By narrative condensation of the threat to these institutions into the figure of the fatal femme, the often post-feminist cycle ominously skews actual patterns of gendered violence. However, something in the collapse, the explicit making-violent of the sacrosanct sites of romance and family, is suggestive and politically explosive. The representation of family and heterosexual relationships as figured by psychosis, fear, and simmering threats of violence can, as Harvey suggests, bring attention to the "lack and deformity" of these institutions.

A subversive attack on the family unit happens perhaps most explicitly within the later 'spoof' films which through their qualities of self-parody, are able to create the narrative space to wreak havoc even on family. For example, John Waters' *Serial Mom* features a psychotic mother who takes her protective roles over the top into murder. Kathleen Turner has a field day with a fifties-style suburban housewife who goes berserk. She harasses a neighbour who refuses to recycle with obscene phone calls, secretly enjoys her son's collection of slasher films, and cheerfully cuts the heart out of a boy who stands her daughter up — all the while keeping up appearances, doling out eggs and bacon to hubby and kids. I would not claim that such a film which so brilliantly spoofs the ubiquitous happy family and good mother can neutralize the neo-conservatism of *Fatal Attraction, Cradle,* or *Disclosure.* However, if we think of films not only as isolated texts or univocal carriers of ideology, and begin to examine the intertextual dialogue which happens across genre and cycle, messages about family and gender relations become more complex. Explicit moments of self-parody in a film like *Serial Mom* function partly to comment on the thematically-connected films of the fatal femme cycle generally, creating patterns of ironic overlay — a certain critical distance from which to interrogate strikingly resilient, idealized fifties models of happy families .

[4] Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (Anchor Books, 1991), p. 113.

[5] Janey Place, "Women in film noir", *Women in Film Noir*, ed E. Ann Kaplan (British Film Institute 1980), p. 45.

[6] Sylvia Harvey, "Woman's Place: the absent family of film noir", *Women in Film Noir*, ed E. Ann Kaplan (British Film Institute 1980, pp. 22-34).

[7] *SWF* presents a much more odious lesbophobic narrative than *Basic Instinct,* with all its tongue-in-cheek overkill ever could. This film makes explicit the dangers surrounding yuppie single white girls like good-girl Allie (Bridget Fonda). Unlike the virtual clone *Deadbolt,* where the creepy obsessive assailant roommate is a man, Allie's nemesis arrives in the psychotic persona of self-effacing Hedy, played with characteristic gusto by Jennifer Jason Leigh. The lesbian threat is more than a spectre in this film, where Hedy seeks to emulate, ultimately to *replace* her object of desire. With its up-front rivalry between women, *SWF* in some ways resembles *Cradle,* but its heinous lesbophobic subtext in relation to a 'single girl' protagonist makes it stand apart from the other fatal femme films.

[8] Harvey, op. cit., p. 33.

Masculine Anxiety and Closure Interruptus

If the troubled state of the private sphere of family and intimate male-female relations provides a backdrop to the fatal femme's nefarious schemes, many of the films of this cycle also foreground gendered conflicts over *public* power and authority. In her discussion of *Basic Instinct*, Lynda Hart, following Todorov, differentiates between the subgenres of the 'whodunnit' whose "formal conventions depend on a reconstruction of the past" (and a definitive solution to the riddle) — and the thriller form which functions in the mode of "anticipation and uncertainty." The latter form tends to undermine the authority of its protagonist, who fails at the task of definitively 'solving' a mystery, and in the process becomes subject to a whole range of mysterious, unknown forces. In classic *noir* like *Double Indemnity* or *Sunset Boulevard*, the thriller problematizes the authoritative and righteous position of the male detective-hero who is both fascinated and put at risk by the *femme fatale*.

Certainly the provisionally authoritative male pro-tagonists of the fatal femme cycle must be seen as exceptionally ineffectual. As in classic *noir*, leading men Willem Dafoe (*Body of Evidence*), Cary Elwes (*The Crush*), Richard Gere (*Final Analysis*), and Timothy Hutton (*The Temp*) are irresistably drawn into the sticky webs of their respective fatal femmes. Whereas the traditional *femme fatale*'s machinations without exception included sexual advances and an oblique attack on family and 'normal' heterosexual coupledom, the fatal femme additionally seeks to undermine the protagonist's career and sully his good name and public authority. The fatal femme cycle, then, explicitly shifts the narrative stakes toward the social context of contemporary (post) feminism and affirmative action. For example, in *The Temp* and *Disclosure*, Lara Flynn Boyle and Demi Moore are up-front out to steal Our Hero's job, and with it his God-given economic and social status. The cycle's recurring dramatization of twinned male public and private humiliation corresponds to what Dyer calls "a certain anxiety over the status and definition of masculinity and normality."[9]

This anxiety gets played out in certain fatal femme films through a starkly literal dramatization of battles over public authority and power in the work place. In keeping with the pastel tones and interiors of the cycle generally, these conflicts are dramatized within the well-heeled environs of yuppie professional angst. Amplifying the political stakes, the embattled male figures of the cycle offer a cross-section of traditional male professional bastions of authority: Willem Dafoe as lawyer, Richard Gere as psychoanalyst in *Final Analysis*, Timothy Hutton as executive in *The Temp*, Michael Douglas as executive in *Disclosure* and, classically, as detective in *Basic Instinct*. Locked into a tactical, sexual, physical, and intellectual face-off with the fatal femme, the male protagonist loses considerable symbolic ground. While this hero may often ultimately prevail, rarely is the function of narrative closure enough to heal this discursive rift in the armour of masculinity. A brief review of Michael Douglas's career may help to succinctly illustrate this point.

Michael Douglas has recently made a career playing an aggrieved object of aggressive female desire.[10] From a lapse in marital bliss in *Fatal Attraction*, to the lapsed cop in *Basic Instinct,* to the embattled former playboy executive family man in *Disclosure,* this actor more than any other embodies Hollywood's rather sinister demonization of the fatal femme career woman. Yet in this triumvirate of 'backlash' films, what emerges most strongly is perhaps Douglas's vulnerability, his 'not quite up to scratch' qualities as a leading man. Both in *Disclosure* and *Basic Instinct,* Douglas cuts a rather unappealing figure as a flabby ageing stud, an easy match for the fatal femmes who dog his footsteps. In the first and the third films of this thematic trio (significantly, films articulated centrally around the defence of the family), Douglas barely ultimately musters the wherewithall, through the help of his loyal and understanding wife, to vanquish the fatal femme. But in *Basic Instinct,* the most provocative and potentially most transgressive film of the trio, if not the cycle, Douglas falls hard.

From the infallible cop of *Streets of San Francisco* (1972-1977) to inept, substance-abusing Detective Curran in the 1992 *Basic Instinct,* Douglas loses his unchippable veneer. Although Douglas, the big star with the big name and the big salary is positioned as protagonist, he is consistently upstaged by unknown Sharon Stone. Stone's Catherine Trammell epitomizes to the *n*th degree the tactical advantages afforded the fatal femme: younger, better educated, richer, smarter, sexier, *harder,* she easily outmanoeuvres Curran at every turn. Garnering a seemingly omniscient diegetic status, Trammell effortlessly gains access to Nick's personal file (and his apartment), reinitiates him into his former bad habits of smoking and drinking, and implicates him in the murder of his colleague — effectively masterminding his suspension from the force. Further, Trammell's often-cited degree in psychology and her status as a best-selling novelist explicitly afford her representational power within the film. Although told from Nick's point of view, the device of Catherine's book where he is merely a character to be

killed off at will suggests an outright battle over the power of naming, narrative, and endings.

With a self-conscious twist running through Esterhasz's script, *Basic Instinct* makes explicit the narrative and generic stakes of endings and containment which I have been talking about. By foregrounding representation and narrative formulas, and ultimately refusing to contain its female anti-heroine, the film leaves open the chapter of the fatal femme. Ultimately, not only does Curran fail to decisively solve the mystery of the crime and of the woman, but the real perpetrator escapes scot-free, with the detective's heart, badge, and gun in hand. Significantly, *Basic Instinct* closes with a happily deluded Douglas in bed with a murderess who is poised to eliminate him at any moment. In classic bookend formula, the film ends with Curran/Douglas in the place of Johnny Boz (the victim in the opening sequence) as Stone's sacrificial lamb. And to add insult to immanent injury, he's babbling deludedly about family and coupledom: *"We'll fuck like minks, raise rugrats, and live happily ever after."* More than any other film of the cycle, *Basic Instinct* highlights the physical/sexual vulnerability and declining moral authority of its male protagonist. With its ironic narrative distance from the family concerns of melodrama enacted in *Fatal Attraction* and *Disclosure, Basic Instinct*'s fascination with a female monstrosity and promise of repreat performances suggests an uncontainable, proliferating fatal femme more than a little akin to the creatures of horror film.

Compulsive Repetition: The Irrepressible Fatal Femme

In deference to a general importation of horror convention into neo-*noir* across the board from *Dressed to Kill* to the 1991 remake of *Cape Fear*, the irrepressibility of the fatal femme garners another dimension. Commonly diffused or killed through the requirements of narrative closure, the fatal femme still demonstrates an almost superhuman capability to wreak havoc from outside the frame, even from beyond the grave. After definitively destroying the career of her object of desire (Cary Elwes), the teenaged anti-heroine of *The Crush*, for example, continues to terrorize him by mail, even from the mental institution. Like the final shot of Michael or Freddy Kruger, eclipsed for now but certain to rise again, this twisted saga ends on a close-up of the teen-aged fatal femme's face as she develops a repeat homicidal obsession with her psychiatrist. *Final Analysis*, likewise, concludes with psychiatrist Richard Gere watching the younger sister (Uma

9 Richard Dyer,"Resistance Through Charisma: Rita Hayworth and *Gilda*", *Women in Film Noir*, ed E. Ann Kaplan (British Film Institute 1980), p. 91.

10 *Village Voice* film critic J. Hoberman has a field day with Douglas in a recent article, "Victim Victorious", (*Village Voice* March 7 1995), pp. 31-33. Hoberman links Douglas's recent film career to a broader trend of what he calls "resentful white men" who with some success cast themselves as victims to the aggressive politically correct onslaught of anyone not like them, including feminists, people of colour, and so on. Reflecting on Douglas's remarkably paranoid call to arms for the good old boys, we might note that, as usual gender battles are not really about women at all, but about the delicate male ego.

Thurman) of his recently-killed nemesis (Kim Basinger) take on her older sister's role as seductress and manipulator, and murderer of hapless men.

The fatal femme cycle does not function on the logic of numerical slasher sequels like *Halloween* or *Nightmare on Elm Street*, but rather the lethal (blonde) figure proliferates through an astonishing range of cloned plot-lines and variations on a marketable formula. *Basic Instinct*, the most profitable and controversial film of the cycle, epitomizes the phenomenon of killer blondes and male paranoia. The film's overpopulation of fatal femmes recursively echoes the ambiguities and the overkill of the cycle generally. Featuring not one, not two, but four interconnected female killers, Joe Eszterhas's rambling script plays with the identity of 'the' serial killer, only to discover that *all four major female characters* are guilty of arbitrary and brutal murder of the men in their lives. Meanwhile, neither the film's twisty ending, and Queer Nation's message that "Catherine did it" can entirely convince the spectator that the mystery has been solved. As in the open endings of *Final Analysis* and *The Crush,* the film merely leaves us to contemplate the icepick under Nick Everyman's bed.

Basic Instinct's ambiguous ending might well be read on a technical level as a failed detective yarn.[11] Leaving such judgements aside, however, we might read this ambiguity differently in relation to the film's (and the cycle's) inability, even reluctance, to close the chapter on the fatal femme. As I mentioned above, Dyer characterizes traditional *noir* as expressing "a certain anxiety over the existence of masculinity and normality." The fatal femme cycle, then, plays out this anxiety in increasingly violent, overtly paranoid, at times overtly ridiculous scenarios of sexually deviant, all-powerful female characters. With its overpopulation of blonde sexually ambiguous serial killers, *Basic Instinct* takes the cake in this department. The film takes Queer Nation's accusations of stereotyping and amplifies them exponentially, hurtling the film's sexual politics over the top. Lynda Hart notes that

> *Basic Instinct* is thus an almost comical rendition of the deadliness of women. This thematic overkill, however, is not achieved simply by addition. For it is the complicated relationship between these women that produces the film's horror. It is not, in other words, so much what they *do* individually that makes for the film's gripping suspense as it is the mystery of their relationships with each other.[12]

With its bevy of what J. Hoberman calls "rich, beautiful, man-slashing crypto-lesbians," *Basic Instinct* pushes the cycle's common hyperbolic component of female violence into the realm of self-parody. A wry inflection peppers the fatal femme cycle, rearing its sly head most powerfully in *Basic Instinct,* as well as in star codes and suggestive situations of other films. For example, in *Poison Ivy* the possibilities for bizarrely dysfunctional psycho-sexual 'family values' reach new limits through a combination of hijacked star codes and textbook Freudian oedipal triangles. As for *Body of Evidence*, Madonna's role as S/M queen who literally fucks faint-hearted men to death would provide high comic relief if it were not so lead-footed in every technical aspect. Simoneau's *Mother's Boys*, a film which otherwise follows sheeplike in the tracks of *Fatal Attraction* or *Cradle*, features a bravura performance by Jamie Lee Curtis. The actress plays the disturbed returning mother part with a gusto which could only spring from a composite of sexually and psychotically-charged roles from *Halloween* to *A Fish Called Wanda* to *Blue Steel.*

Finally, it is in its spoof incarnation that the fatal femme cycle finds its playful, self-referential stride. An implicit commentary on, and partial antidote to, the bile of films like *Cradle* or *Fatal Attraction* may be found in the antics of the Mike Myers' vehicle *So I Married An Axe Murderer*, in the composite titled *Fatal Instinct*, or, Kathleen Turner's turn at acting out all the repressed psychoses of suburban housewifery in *Serial Mom*. Here, the tough-talking star of *V. I. Warshawski* plays a terminally cheerful, Doris Day-style suburban mom who cheerfully runs over her son's math teacher with the family station wagon. The strongly ironic tone of *Basic Instinct* alerts us to a tendency which recurs in many of the films of the cycle, culminating in the 'spoof' vehicles. By highlighting *Basic Instinct*'s tongue-in-cheek, hyperbolic qualities, I would like to qualify and diverge from the literal type of reading offered by Queer Nation. The film's strong inflection of irony cannot ultimately provide an airtight alibi for the film's many troubling points (such as the violent containment of both the Beth and Roxy characters). However, by looking at the complex textures of this hackneyed, perhaps even deeply misogynist film, we can identify moments of struggle (for example, over representation and closure), and even moments of rupture which allow for pleasureable feminist readings.

In the work of feminist cultural criticism, we need to develop a savvy into shifting contemporary sensibilities (like Collins' "ironic eclecticism") which pervade not only mainstream cultural production, but perhaps more importantly, inform our own critical, feminist, and lesbian film appreciation. I am not arguing that my reading must be the only correct one, but it suggests that a multivalent cultural text like *Basic Instinct* merits closer attention than is meted out by a rote literal critique. In the spirit of this alternate reading, then, consider C. Carr's take on the film.

> This is a movie about male anxiety and paranoia. Women who are sexually powerful cause their anxiety, as do women emotionally attached to other women. Catherine is both. True—she and the other three might all be killers. But look who they've killed. Family, for one thing. Brothers. Men who might become husbands. It's part of the whole male anxiety scenario. In fact, it's almost a parody of a guy's worst nightmare. And I thought it was a scream.[13]

Similarly, when considering the fatal femme cycle as a whole, I do not deny the misogynist messages of *Cradle, Fatal Attraction, Disclosure,* or John Dahl's humourless diptych *Red Rock West* and *The Last Seduction*. But by looking at the ambiguities and unravelling ironies which work
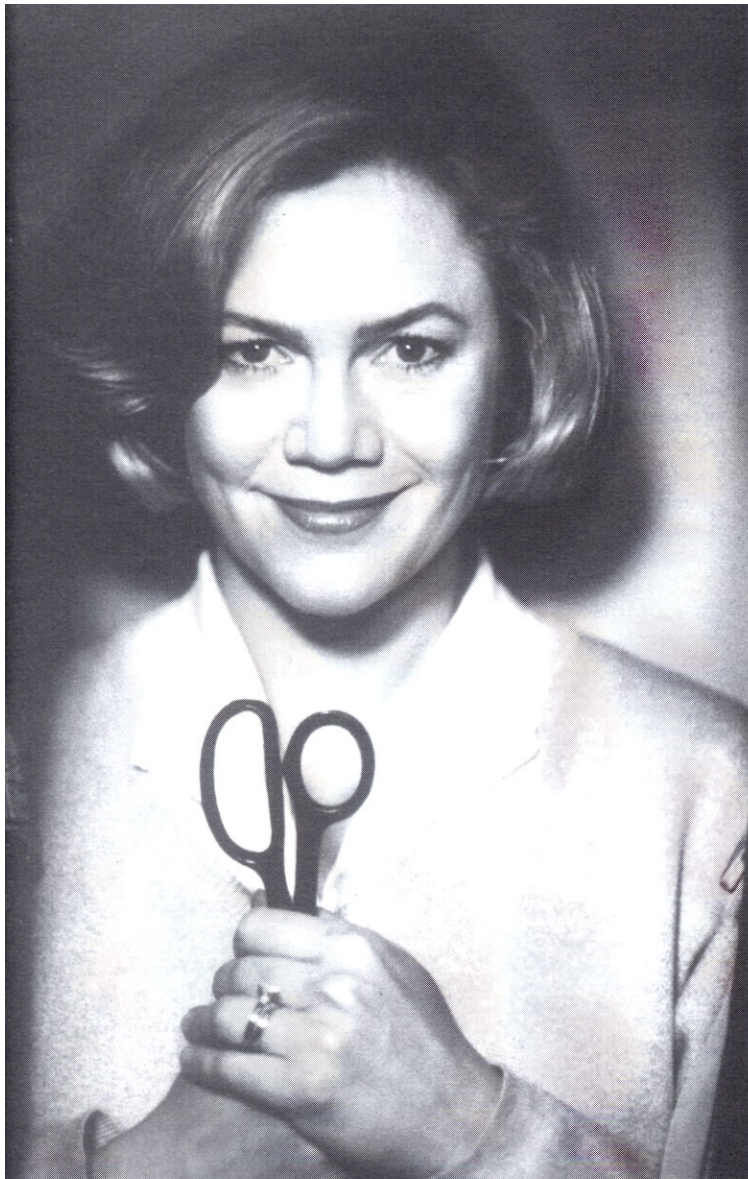
al Mom

through the cycle, we can begin to explore the complexities of intertextual signifying systems. Whatever the individual intentions of producers, writers, directors, or actors, the generic proliferation of the fatal femme figure can never perform a *merely* repressive, 'containing' gesture. On the contrary, I have tried to indicate here how gender and power get deployed productively across this cycle of films, offering at times an ironic or even unintended critique of family values, of gender relations, of masculine authority. Further, as I will discuss in the final section, the particular irrepressible affective charge of the fatal femme figure herself plays off the powerful articulation of (white, upper middle class) femininity and violence.

Violence Against Women and the 'Violent Femme': Reversal, Excess, Fantasy

A Pandora's Box of the 1990s, the sheer proliferation of fatal femme figures throughout popular culture[14] implies a widespread uneasiness which can never be entirely wished away. This obsessive working through of the threat of emergent female power gets dramatized through the thriller's particular cultural matrix of fearful anticipation coupled with the appeal of forbidden sexual titillation culminating in ultra-violent conflict. Against a socio-political backdrop of rapid social change and anti-feminist backlash, the fatal femme cycle condenses debates around family, sexuality, and power into violent confrontations between larger-than-life composite figures like Michael Douglas's Detective Nick Curran and Sharon Stone's Catherine Trammell. The fatal femme figure herself, the controversial best-selling centrepiece of this cycle of films, presents the ultimate larger-than-life monstrosity, a kind of paranoid caricature of the state of the North American male unconscious. Revealing little in a realist sense about *any* North American female experience, the impossible figure of the 'violent femme' carries an affective, fantastical charge, a discursive excess, which can be intriguing for feminists.

When first looking at this cycle of films in the early 1990s, I was most forcefully struck by the popularity of the 'violent femme' (the ultra-violent, pistol-packing, knife-wielding, all 'round demolition mama) through popular culture as a bizarre reversal of what I saw happening all around me as a feminist. In short, for some two decades the feminist movement has been hard pressed to put the issue of systemic violence against women into public discourse. The transition from discourses of 'real life' gendered violence to the representational sphere of Hollywood's fatal femmes produces a bizarre and sinister reversal, a patriarchal sleight of hand. Granted, women figure with almost banal regularity as victims and corpses across the commercial mediascape. And aspects of violence against women have been explored through documentaries, issues-oriented television and through a handful of films like *Loyalties, Living with Billy, The Accused, The Burning Bed, Extremities,* or *Thelma and Louise.* Still, with the exception of the latter, these dramas have largely been eclipsed in profits and notoriety by the likes of *Fatal Attraction* or *Basic Instinct.* The fatal femme flies in the face of what we know as feminists about statistical

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[11] Like Joe Eszterhas's next script *Sliver* (also starring Sharon Stone), the plot twists so excessively as to prove several culprits guilty at once, leaving open several possible endings — the final one selected, undoubtedly, according to test audience response.

[12] Hart, op. cit. p. 128.

[13] C. Carr, "Reclaiming Our *Basic* Rights" (*The Village Voice,* April 28 1992), pp. 35-36. This piece ran alongside a similarly wry (and in my eyes, appropriate) reading of the film by Amy Taubin as a rebuttal to what these writers called a gay male led hysterical onslaught on the film by Queer Nation. It is a tribute to the reductive tendencies of public debate that the *only* 'queer' reading of the film within mainstream as well as lesbian-feminist circles belongs to the "Catherine did it" bunch. This case points, I think, to the need for ongoing efforts to develop complex and accessible progressive cultural criticism.

[14] The fatal femme articulates of course with high-profile 'reel life' cases in the news like Lorena Bobbitt, Aileen Wuornos, Karla Homolka, Susan Smith. Far beyond the scope of this article, a discussion of the links between the realm of representation and news / documentary pathologization of women offenders may be found in Helen Birch's excellent anthology, *Moving Targets: Women, Murder and Representation* (Virago 1993).

gendered violence, and jars uncomfortably with cultural conventions which position women most often as passive objects of male violence.

In this light, what I still find most irreducibly intriguing and disturbing about the fatal femme cycle is precisely its escalating levels of on-screen violence perpetrated by women. The concluding ultra-violent crescendos of *Fatal Attraction* or *Single White Female* echo the increased intermingling of *noir* and slasher genres we see in films like *Cape Fear* (1991). But what is new in 1980s and especially 1990s film is the sheer physicality, a graphic and protracted on-screen female violence, from all three *Alien* films, to *Terminator II*, to *Blue Steel*, to *La Femme Nikita* and the fatal femme. Gone are the days of the tiny Saturday night special pulled daintily from a pearl clutch purse. Now we have Sharon Stone astride a naked middle-aged flabby man slashing him repeatedly with an ice-pick. Or, Jennifer Jason Leigh going down on her roommate's sleeping boyfriend to seduce him, only to nail a spiked heel through his eye when he recognizes her. Or, daddy's little girl Alicia Silverstone (*The Crush*) wielding a two-by-four like a battering ram as Cary Elwes takes refuge in a restored merry-go-round. Or, kinetic violent femmes *Vampire Slayer* Kristy Swanson, or fembot Lena Olin (*Romeo is Bleeding*) dispatching all comers with lethal backflips — their bodies transformed into superhuman, high velocity killing machines.

The hyperbolic overkill of these situations may be partly attributed to a heightened societal paranoia about women's sexual and other powers. Yet there is something powerfully unsettling, a kind of emotional and fantastical excess which escapes the conventional rationalist explanations of narrative closure and backlash. Against a remarkably constant cultural convention (both 'mainstream' *and* 'feminist') which positions women across the board as *victims* of violence, as lifeless corpse or quivering, endangered waif ripe for the saving, the fatal femme cuts a potent, exceptional figure. As Judith Halberstam suggests, the 'violent femme's' inversion of the commonsense dynamic of gendered violence can make for a disruptive gesture.

Role reversal never simply replicates the terms of an equation. The depiction of women committing acts of violence against men does not simply use "male" tactics of aggression for other ends; in fact, female violence transforms the symbolic function of the feminine within popular narratives and it simultaneously challenges the hegemonic insistence upon the linking of might and right under the sign of masculinity.[15]

Along these lines, many feminists have enthusiastically endorsed the justified revenge fantasy offered us by Ridley Scott's proto-feminist film *Thelma and Louise*. Similarly, Kirsten Marthe Lenz, for example, notes the 'justified' violence used by women in *Terminator II, Blue Steel, Eve of Destruction*, and *V. I. Warshawski*.[16] Within the fatal femme cycle however, the 'violent femme' rarely lines up in a straightforward way with the forces of righteousness, feminist or otherwise. Many of these films toy provocatively with delicate feminist issues like sexual

harassment (*Disclosure, The Last Seduction*), date rape (*Basic Instinct, Single White Female*), statutory rape (*Poison Ivy, The Crush*) — effectively turning the tables on years of feminist campaigning to claim that the crime was either fabricated, or "she wanted it." In fact, the entire fatal femme cycle is premised on a perhaps cynical, perhaps tongue-in-cheek fabrication of the female murderer/ serial killer. The prevalence of the fatal femme narrative seizes obsessively on the exception to the overwhelming rule of *male violence committed against women*. The thriller further specializes in turning the tables on what is perhaps *the* quintessential (and most high profile) male crime against women: sexual assault coupled with violent attack.

Clearly, there is no unproblematic way to square the on-screen violence of the fatal femme cycle (or popular culture generally) with real, statistical violence. Nonetheless, I would concur, cautiously, with Halberstam when she claims that "violence against white men perpetrated by women or people of color disrupts the logic of represented violence so thoroughly that (at least for a while) the emergence of such unsanctioned violence has an unpredictable power." Even in the politically ambiguous fatal femme cycle, the consistent turning of the tables allows (female) spectators to explore a shift at the level of fantasy and representation, as Lenz suggests, "from being the object of violence (victimization) to being its subject (aggression)." Where in our everyday lives as women we are bombarded by the evidence of our increasing vulnerability, poverty, and limited social power, the fatal femme's embodied social, sexual, and physical powers offer an imagined point of contact, if not simply identification — an imagined momentum or venting of rage and revenge fantasies — the importance of which cannot be underestimated.

Halberstam stresses the potentiality of a shift from imagined fear to imagined violence for marginalized, often victimized groups. It is here, at the level of fantasy, where the potent figure of the fatal femme offers us an attitude to try on for size. For all its ugly anti-feminist baggage, the fatal femme cycle also offers us precious moments of wicked escape, even the critical distance and humourous release of irony. Catherine Trammell, with all of her impossible verve and absolute sexual confidence, her ability to turn a room full of seasoned cops into so much quivering jelly, even her tight grip on the proverbial castrating ice pick, provides moments of supreme pleasure for the feminist spectator — a fleeting but potentially empowering fantasy of transcendence to bolster up our imaginary reserve.

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[15] Halberstam, op. cit. p. 191.

[16] The depiction of violence in self-defence by righteous babes forms another overlapping contemporary cycle which I would call the 'Final Girl' formula in deference to Carol Clover's term in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* (Princeton 1992). As Clover suggests in her Afterword, the shift of the exploitation horror constant Final Girl into the mainstream movie diet can be seen in films like *Blue Steel, Sleeping with the Enemy, Silence of the Lambs, A Kiss Before Dying, Dead Bolt,* and so on.

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Zapruder Footage & Cop Reality Shows
Serial Killers & Fatal Femmes
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